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Jeffry H. Morrison. *The Political Philosophy of George Washington.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. 256 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9109-0.

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George Washington Thinking

Despite the explosion of interest in the era, lives, and achievements of the founding fathers and the profusion of books written to reach that market, few scholars have taken George Washington seriously as a political or constitutional thinker. Edmund S. Morgan took up the subject in his brief, sparkling lecture, *The Genius of George Washington* (1980), and in the Washington lecture in his *The Meaning of Independence* (which also discusses John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, 1976). Garry Wills's *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (1984) focuses on Washington's cultural significance and his self-conscious efforts to use his cultural and political stature to achieve his political goals. Finally, Glenn A. Phelps's rigorous study *George Washington and American Constitutionalism* (1993) concentrates on Washington's role in achieving the creation of a continental republic with a vigorous general government, an ideal that he cherished in evolving forms from his time as a colonel in the Virginia militia during the last great colonial war between Britain and France up through his last actions as ex-president in the late 1790s.

Although these books are first-rate as far as they go, we have long needed a careful examination of Washington as a political thinker in his own right, clinching the case made by Morgan, Wills, and Phelps that Washington was far more than an empty vessel waiting to be filled by the dazzling brilliance of Alexander Hamilton, or the referee of Hamilton's epic battle with Thomas Jefferson. *The Political Philosophy of George Washington* amply fills this need. Not only will it reshape our understanding of its chosen subject, it is also a model for all future scholars seeking to examine the political philosophy of a member of the Revolutionary generation of Americans.

Jeffry H. Morrison is associate professor of government at Regent University and a faculty member at the federal government's James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation in Washington, DC; his previous book is an excellent concise exploration of John Witherspoon's role in the creation of the American Republic.[1] *The Political Philosophy of George Washington*, a volume in the series The Political Philosophy of the Founding Fathers inaugurated and edited by Garrett Ward Sheldon, matches Morrison's study of Witherspoon in its clarity and concision, in its grounding in thorough research in primary sources and secondary scholarship, and its success in recapturing the constellation of values and principles at the core of his subject's evolving thinking on the central issues of politics and governance.

The core of Morrison's argument is easily stated. He sets out to demonstrate that three clusters of ideas and principles animated Washington's thinking on politics-classical republicanism, British liberalism, and Protestant Christianity. Although, Morrison acknowledges, Washington was not necessarily a creative or innovative political thinker (as were Hamilton, Madison, and Jefferson), he did think long and hard about politics, sought to educate himself about the amassed wisdom of the Western political tradition, and showed himself a capable adapter of existing ideas and bodies of thought to practical constitutional and political problems facing the American people. In so doing, Morrison demonstrates, Washington did have a political philosophy, one that guided him from his earliest appearance on the American political stage to his last days as "the father of his country" even as it evolved to meet changing conditions and new challenges. Further, his political philosophy was well grounded in the intellectual currents of his time and place while still speaking to the concerns of contemporary Americans.

Beginning with a brisk and witty introduction surveying the historiography of George Washington, Morrison sets forth the main body of his argument in four terse, rich chapters. The first presents an able chronological account of Washington's life, focusing on the evolution of his ideas about politics. Morrison devotes the

remaining chapters to each of the three sources of Washington's thinking. His epilogue ties together the main themes of his book by reference to Washington's various "farewells" (ranging from his 1796 Farewell Address to his will), and he supplements his study with an appendix listing key books from Washington's library at Mount Vernon. The three principal chapters of his book deserve further discussion:

Chapter 2, "Classical Republican Political Culture and Philosophy," traces the influences of ancient Greek and Roman political history and philosophy on George Washington. While rightly rejecting the idea that Washington was some sort of cookie-cutter republican thinker, Morrison nonetheless establishes the influence of the ancient Roman republic on Washington's thinking. In particular, Washington fashioned his own evolving role in American public life on the model of such Roman statesmen as Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus and Marcus Tullius Cicero, emulating their stern and unyielding focus on civic virtue and on public duty as opposed to private preference. (Not for Washington, however, was the occasional eloquent self-dramatizing that we so often find in Cicero's writings–that note turns up, instead, in the life and thought of John Adams.) Morrison reminds us, further, of the Roman republican significance of the title so often associated with Washington in American memory–"the Father of his Country." This title was, of course, rooted in Roman political culture; it was no accident that John Marshall, who revered Washington, built that resonant political phrase into the funeral oration for his old commander that he wrote for his friend and political ally Henry Lee to deliver in 1800.

Chapter 3, "British Liberalism, Revolution, Union, and Foreign Affairs," presents Washington in a guise familiar to most historians of the origins of the Revolution but unfamiliar to most Americans–as a man devoted to principles of British constitutionalism outraged by what he saw in the late 1760s and early 1770s as British officials' violations of those principles. Emerging early as a radical among members of the Virginia House of Burgesses and delegates to the First and Second Continental Congresses, Washington then reluctantly accepted the command of the Continental Army, in which post he continued to cling to ideas and ideals of such British political thinkers as John Locke and Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke. Both as commander in chief and then as president, Washington guided himself by the ideal of the nonpartisan patriot chief executive limned by Bolingbroke, while with equal staunchness rejecting all ideas or possibilities of his becoming an American monarch. Further, throughout his life Washington held with equal strength to the idea of America as a neutral power in world affairs, seeking to remain engaged with the world while rejecting what Jefferson memorably called "entangling alliances" that would limit the new nation's freedom of action.

Chapter 4, "Protestant Christianity, Providence, and the Republic," ably argues that Washington, a religious man though largely private about his own convictions, "balanced public piety with religious liberty in uniquely American ways" (p. 136). Like the John Adams who was the principal framer of the Massachusetts constitution of 1780, Washington believed that religion, specifically biblical Protestant Christianity, was an essential prop of the American constitutional system, in that it preserved and guided the virtue that all republican political thinkers agreed was essential to the preservation of republican government. At the same time, Washington took great pains to ensure that those who did not fit comfortably within the Protestant Christian consensus reigning among Americans–whether such dissenting Protestant denominations as the Quakers and Baptists or the Roman Catholic Church or the tiny communities of American Jews–would have, and know that they had, the fullest measure of constitutional liberty for their free exercise of religious belief and worship. This last chapter may provoke controversy, given the fraught nature of issues of church and state in American public life today, and in particular the relevance of "original intent," "original understanding," and "original meaning" controversies to modern constitutional interpretation. It suffices for our purposes to say that Morrison's able and sensitive examination of the role of Protestant Christianity in Washington's thought resonates with previous discussions of the matter presented by such excellent works as David L. Holmes's *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*(2006). Morrison does not conscript Washington into the modern separationist or accommodationist camps in constitutional disputation. Rather, he is doing his best, with considerable success, to elucidate the interplay between Washington's rarely discussed but deeply held religious convictions and his more secular political values and commitments.

All told, *The Political Philosophy of George Washington* is admirably concise, thorough, and responsible. In particular, it puts to rest an unfair canard launched at Washington after his death by John Adams that has come to dominate historians' assessments of Washington's intellect. In the last years of their lives, Adams and his old friend and fellow signer of the Declaration of Independence Benjamin Rush conducted a warm, friendly correspondence, one theme of which was their efforts to

nurse each other's resentment of Washington.[2] Rush ran afoul of Washington during the Revolutionary War, when he inspected the sanitary conditions of the Continental Army and protested what he deemed a scandalous state of affairs, only to get the back of the general's hand. Adams, who in 1775 had nominated Washington to be named commander in chief of the Continental Army and then languished for eight years (1789-97) as the nation's first vice president, felt eclipsed by Washington despite Adams's greater experience and study of politics and government, his deeper understanding of history and political thought, and his greater ability with his pen. To ease his temper and entertain his friend, Adams penned a letter cataloguing the ten reasons why Washington had achieved greatness in the eyes of Americans, including such matters as his being a Virginian, his height, and his gift of silence. Adams concluded, "You see I have made a list of ten talents without saying a word about reading, thinking, or writing."[3] It would have been interesting to place *The Political Philosophy of George Washington* before the Sage of Braintree and await his reaction.

Notes

[1.] Jeffrey H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005).

[2.] John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1966; reprint, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2000), is the best and most accessible modern edition of this correspondence; see note 3 below for an older edition.

[3.] John Adams to Benjamin Rush, November 11, 1807, reprinted in Schutz and Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame*, 105-108 (quote on 107). A fuller text of this letter is reprinted in *Old Family Letters Copied from the Originals for Alexander Biddle, Series A* (Philadelphia: Press of J. B. Lippincott, 1892), 167-173 (quote on 170).

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