H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthew J. Flynn, Stephen E. Griffin. *Washington & Napoleon: Leadership in the Age of Revolution.* Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2012. xvii + 253 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59797-278-9.

Reviewed by Wayne Hanley (West Chester University)

Published on H-War (June, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Washington and Napoleon: At first glance the two seem to have little in common. Even in his own time, contemporaries viewed George Washington as a modern incarnation of Cincinnatus, the Roman dictator who gave up supreme political and military power to return to his plow. By contrast, critics of the French emperor saw him as a man of boundless ambition who coveted power and only fell at the bayonet points of the combined armies of Europe. In their *Washington and Napoleon: Leadership in the Age of Revolution*, however, Matthew J. Flynn and Stephen E. Griffin analyze surprising commonalities between the two. While intriguing and worth reading, at times their work suffers from an incomplete understanding of Napoleon (and Napoleonic Europe) and niggling factual errors and internal contradictions which undermine their thought-provoking analysis.

Flynn and Griffin find their thesis in a comment made by Napoleon to Las Casas on St. Helena that "he would have been a Washington had he been in Washington's place, and that Washington himself would have been a Napoleon had he lived in France" (p. xii). While one should always be cautious of anything the former emperor said during his final exile–when he waged a rhetorical campaign to secure his reputation for posterity–the notion offers an opportunity for such a comparison. The result, as the authors note, is that "Napoleon humanizes Washington, revealing his more complex motives. In turn, Washington redeems Napoleon by making him a servant of the state" (p. xiii). The parallels are not perfect, as the authors acknowledge, but their thesis is worthy of exploration. Too often when examining the lives of these two, Washington is portrayed as an idealized hero, and cynics only see the baseness of Napoleon's motive.

To correct these perceptions, Flynn and Griffin divide their analysis into five chapters, beginning with the rise to prominence of their subjects, their maturation as leaders, their use of power, and their perceptions by others. Both men, for example, arose against the odds from humble origins, and with few prospects, they both looked to military careers as a means of social and economic advancement. Washington, of course, used political connections to gain appointment as colonel in the Virginia militia, while Bonaparte became an artillery officer. In their early careers, both showed flair for self-promotion and political patronage that greatly enhanced their reputations. Ironically it was Washington's published account of his failed 1753 expedition and his role in General Braddock's 1755 defeat that thrust him to prominence, portraying him as a man able to surmount challenging situations. Bonaparte, likewise, used patronage during the Revolution to take advantage of his situation to gain appointment as commander of the artillery during the siege of Toulon, where his bold plan quickly led to the city's capture. Once in power the two men sought to govern their respective republics in the best interests of their countries and themselves: Washington consciously seeking to "protect his legacy" (p. 125) and Bonaparte, to balance the ideals of the Revolution with his "hunger for power" (p. 146). In the process, both left their indelible imprints on their countries.

It does not take long for problems to emerge in their analysis, however, as Flynn and Griffin attempt to demonstrate "which general best understood his strategic necessities and could use that understanding to survive" in their second chapter (p. 35). They correctly assess Washington's ascendancy as military leader during the Revolution, noting the role fortune played in his success (at Boston and his retreat from New York) and the molding of the Continental Army. What separated Washington from his rivals for command was his recognition that the survival of the Continental Army was paramount, so Washington adopted Fabian tactics which

wore down the British. And because the army survived, Washington was able to take advantage of the opportunity offered by Cornwallis at Yorktown in what proved to be the decisive battle of the war.

As the authors turn to their analysis of Napoleon's career, they write that despite his fame as "the most famous soldier in Western history," Napoleon "earned this title from a record of failure" (p. 57). They also try to develop the novel idea that he failed to adapt to guerrilla warfare and "shrank from irregular warfare as a military practice" (p. 77), an idea completely rejected by military historian and expert on Spain during the Napoleonic era Charles Esdaile.[3] In the end the authors conclude that because of this, "Washington's generalship was superior to Napoleon's" (p. 78). One wonders about Napoleon's remarkable string of victories between 1796 and 1807, the victories (and the skillful self-promotion of those victories) that created his reputation. Flynn and Griffin gloss over Bonaparte's earlier successes and see his "failed" career "not mixed so much as it represents an inevitable progression," noting that his wars led to ever more wars and his eventual defeat at Waterloo (p. 58). This line of reasoning begins with the Italian campaign, where according to the authors "even early French victories meant more fighting. But the tally came rapidly and was impressive: Lodi, Milan, Mantua ... " (p. 59). The Italian campaign was just that, a campaign, a series of battles designed to achieve its goals. Of course more than one battle would ensue. No one had planned for a single knockout blow of the Piedmontese and Austrian armies: indeed, no knockout blow was intended at all. Napoleon's role in the grand strategy of 1796 was as a diversion from the main blows, which were to occur in Germany. That the Italian campaign took center stage is due to Bonaparte's remarkable successes, as the authors acknowledge, but they also raise questions about their understanding of Napoleon's military career with a series of factual errors.

Napoleon, for example, did not defend Mantua against repeated Austrian counterattacks, so much as he maintained his siege of the fortress-city against repeated attempts of the Austrians to break that siege. The decisive battle of the campaign was not Arcola, as the authors seem to suggest (pp. 59 and 67), but at Rivoli, which is not mentioned at all (Mantua fell two weeks later and nearly nine months after the capture of Milan). And by the time Bonaparte took possession of Loeben, his army was no longer the "small army" with which he had begun the campaign, but was now approximately 80,000 men strong.[1] When describing Napoleon's early career, they note the failure of his "military defeat at Ajaccio, his uneventful seaborne invasion of Sardinia," which are exaggerations of Bonaparte's roles in those events (p. 32). The affair at Ajaccio (1792) was more a political event about the fate of Corsica during the Revolution than a battle, and Bonaparte was a very junior officer in the failed attempt to seize Sardinia.[2] These errors and misstatements are not alone. Corsica, for example, became French under Louis XV, not Louis XVI (p. 17). Bonaparte was of noble birth, not royal (p. 20). Later, describing the campaign of 1805, the authors write that the French destroyed an Austrian army at Ulm (p. 63); that army was forced to surrender. They refer to conscription during the empire as the *levée-en-masse*, a policy which the emperor explicitly avoided (p. 77). They refer to brother Lucien as being "in charge of the Estates-General" in 1799, except that that body had not existed since 1789 and Lucien was actually president of the Council of Five Hundred (p. 106). They describe Napoleon as wearing a corporal's uniform, when he actually favored the uniform of a colonel of the chasseurs of the imperial guard (p. 184). Taken individually these errors seem to be simple misstatements that survived the editing process, but taken together, they are suggestive of an incomplete understanding of Napoleon and Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, and as such they undermine the authors' thesis.

The authors also employ a number of seemingly conflicting arguments. They question, for example, Washington's motivations and his commitments to the ideals of the American Revolution, especially in their discussion of Washington's defusing of the Newburgh conspiracy: "There was the issue of personal prestige that was tied to the preservation of Congress. An overthrow of the government, while popular with some, would violate Washington's words, given when he accepted the congressional commission to lead the army and defend the government. Second, Washington must have understood the practical limitations of the use of military force to establish the rule of law" (pp. 85-86). Later they undermine their questioning of Washington, quoting historian James Roger Sharp: "Washington had a 'well-known commitment to republicanism' " (p. 124). In fact, as one reads the analysis of Flynn and Griffin, one is struck by how often Washington, unlike Bonaparte, stepped back from the brink of personal rule to preserve republican ideals by surrendering authority to Congress. Ultimately the authors concede that is was possible for Washington to preserve republican ideals while protecting his reputation (p. 125).

This concession is perhaps the key to understand-

ing the primary shortcoming of this book. As the authors compare Napoleon and Washington, they try to hold too closely to the former emperor's assertion during his exile to show how alike these two great leaders were. Flynn and Griffin are at their best when they focus on the similar circumstances of Washington and Napoleon and compare their responses to those circumstances. Both men arose from relatively humble origins; both men were concerned about their reputations and allowed those concerns to affect their decisions; and both men used military success as a stepping stone to political success. Their responses to these situations were not as similar as Napoleon suggested on St. Helena: Washington seems to have balanced his personal ambitions for the good of his nation; Napoleon ultimately placed his personal ambitions above the good of the nation. While the authors may disagree, I doubt this would have changed had their circumstances been switched. When the authors try to force-fit similarities (and make careless factual errors), they undermine the virtues of their thesis. For what Flynn and Griffin attempt, I applaud them; I wish their effort had been a little better executed.

Notes

[1]. See David Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1969), 122.

[2]. See Philip Dwyer's well-documented account of these early events in Napoleon's career in his *Napoleon: The Path to Power 1769-1799* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 105-26.

[3]. See Charles J. Esdaile, *The Wars of Napoleon* (London: Longman, 1995), one of several by works Esdaile referenced in the book that refutes the assertion of the authors.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

Citation: Wayne Hanley. Review of Flynn, Matthew J.; Griffin, Stephen E., *Washington & Napoleon: Leadership in the Age of Revolution.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35731

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.