H-Net Reviews
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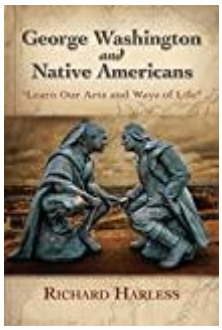
Richard Harless. *George Washington and Native Americans: "Learn Our Arts and Ways of Life".* Fairfax: George Mason University Press, 2018. 300 pp. $35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-942695-14-1.



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In 1753, George Washington first met Seneca chief Tanacharison, also known as the "Half-King." For the twenty-one-year-old Washington, the meeting was an opportunity to align British and Iroquois interests against the French. Although the two men had never met before, Tanacharison knew the young colonel by reputation. "It was at this time," Washington recalled decades later, that he was dubbed by Tanacharison as "Caunotaucarius (in English) the Towntaker" (p. 9).

Native Americans remained a constant concern for the general, and later president, over the next half-century. In *George Washington and Native Americans*, Richard Harless thoroughly examines Washington's views on North America's indigenous peoples, arguing that the president's views "did not remain static, but evolved over time." Harless focuses on three periods of Washington's life: the French and Indian War, the American Revolution, and his presidency. Over time, Washington's views changed "from an obsessive emphasis on the acquisition of tribal land to a commitment to saving Native Americans from the eventual annihilation that he considered a possibility" (p. xiv). Harless draws primarily on the writings of Washington, and he does well to unravel the nuances and subtle changes in these writings. He avoids polemics without ignoring the racial politics. While not uncritical, he offers a largely sympathetic portrayal that situates the president's views within the context of his place and time.

George Washington first encountered Native Americans when he was a surveyor. As intercolonial tensions arose in the Ohio Valley, Washington's contact with indigenous peoples increased, including his encounter with Tanacharison. Harless suggests that these interactions "provided insights into a culture that had previously been alien to him" (p. 10). However, Washington's early acts of diplomacy were ineffective, as the Half-King and other Native warriors chose to abandon British and colonial armies. After Washington failed at Fort Necessity, he acknowledged the Indians' superior fighting ability and became an advocate for supplying them with gifts to win their allegiance against the French. Although Washing-

ton did not view Native Americans as equal to the colonists, Harless insists that he "was not so blinded by his prejudices toward Indians that he would not change or adapt his attitudes toward them" (p. 34).

Following the French and Indian War, Washington's perception of Native Americans was primarily shaped by his own ongoing hunger for land. Harless observes that Washington "felt that buying Indian land was much less demanding—and less costly—than conquering it with military force" (p. 42). When Washington became commander in chief of the Continental Army in 1775, his views of Native Americans were again conditioned by the exigencies of war. Initially, he advocated purchasing indigenous allies, but over time, Washington's understanding became more nuanced. Harless argues that Washington "regarded the amicable Oneidas much as he would any other ally," while authorizing Major General John Sullivan's brutal raids of Iroquois towns across western Pennsylvania and New York (p. 55). Explaining his actions, Washington informed a delegation of Delaware Indians in 1779: "Brothers: I am a Warrior…. 'Tis my business to destroy all the Enemies of these States and to protect their friends" (p. 62).

George Washington's relationship with Native Americans changed again when he became president in 1789. In the longest and most sophisticated portion of the book, Harless explores how the towntaker became a defender of indigenous peoples. Washington inherited a nation with a porous frontier and escalating interracial violence in Trans-Appalachia. Working with Secretary of War Henry Knox, he sought to stem the conflict by negotiating treaties with Native Americans. Although these treaties were primarily a means of seizing land, they signified that Washington regarded indigenous groups as nations, "suggesting that Native American tribes were worthy of a status similar to that of foreign countries" (p. 75).

Much of Washington's administration was consumed with defeating the Western Confederacy, culminating in General Anthony Wayne's victory at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794. Yet the president preferred a program of "civilization" whereby Indians were taught to farm on individual landholdings. He heavily promoted such plans among the southern tribes, in part because the Creeks and Cherokees were already cultivating the land and also because the US Army could not fight on two fronts. But attempts to change indigenous culture failed due to white (and Native) resistance. "I believe scarcely anything short of a Chinese wall, or a line or troops, will restrain Lan jobbers, and the encroachment of settlers upon the Indian territory," Washington wrote in 1796 (p. 131). Harless deduces that Washington's prescriptions were ultimately hemmed in by the weakness of the federal government. Although the president believed "he had a responsibility for ensuring justice and fairness to both whites and Indians," he had neither the resources nor the popular will to protect indigenous peoples or their land (p. 103).

Harless concludes by tracing how Washington's plans for transforming Indians were gradually replaced by policies of removal. With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the US government grew covetous of the lands held by the Cherokees and other indigenous peoples. The rise of scientific racism also extinguished the idea that Native Americans could be "civilized." By the time Andrew Jackson became president in 1829, hardly any of Washington's policies toward Native Americans remained.

George Washington and Native Americans is a thoughtful work with a good deal of important information. Harless strives to provide "a more balanced perspective," which he achieves, portraying the father of his country as neither a bloodthirsty villain nor an unstained hero (p. 61). Other than dispelling these polemics, however, it is unclear exactly what intervention Harless is making. Perhaps the scope of the book is too narrow. Harless limits himself to the writings of Washington and those around him, meaning that Native American

voices are largely missing from this story. Especially at particularly contentious moments (like Sullivan's campaign or the Battle of Fallen Timbers), it would have been helpful to know the indigenous perspective. Although Harless quotes Native Americans where their words appear in Washington's letters, his lack of an engagement with indigenous culture renders Indians largely passive.