

Edward G. Lengel. *First Entrepreneur: How George Washington Built His—and the Nation's—Prosperity*. Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2016. 304 pp. \$25.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-306-82347-3.

Reviewed by Philip Levy

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Until recently, George Washington had the perhaps problematic honor of being the wealthiest man to hold the office of the presidency. He was born to a well-off and well-established Virginia family, but nevertheless, the silver spoon in his mouth was not as large nor as ornate as that provided to children of better-off families. Instead, Washington's wealth came to him, in the words of the old ad campaign, the old-fashioned way: he earned it. In this, his third monograph on the first president, Edward G. Lengel takes readers through the making and maintaining of that prodigious and varied personal business empire. Rather than focusing on one specific element or venture, the book is more an overview—a sort of themed biography that uses Washington's enterprises to explain his life, while his life explains his enterprises. For Lengel, Washington was always on the lookout for the next big thing or for any sudden unexpected opportunity; moreover though, Washington had the acumen (and eventually the financial and human capital as well) to be able to grasp and maximize the many opportunities that came his way. From fish to whiskey and from tobacco to wheat, Washington was expert enough and often lucky enough to wring every shining penny from his holdings.

Lengel has chosen the word “entrepreneur” as his analytic lens through which to view Wash-

ington. There are echoes here of older literature that used the term “business man” to describe Washington as a man of affairs. This latter term suffers from speaking too much from a time not Washington's, whereas the former works more comfortably as an attribute and less a character type. Lengel never defines the term though. Instead, he uses Washington's many “crafty and diligent” activities to throw a relief outline around the concept of entrepreneur and to clarify the term (p. 4). What is more, the term stands in contrast to other similar words often used—sometimes by Washington himself—to capture some aspect or other of the man's story. The “general”—the term long preferred at Mount Vernon—has been explored in depth, not least by Lengel himself. Washington as president has also been the subject of considerable study. Washington the farmer is an identity that has faded in its significance of late but resonated powerfully for the man himself and for some considerable time after his death. Lengel's Washington the entrepreneur is clear-eyed, practical, largely free of potentially inhibiting dogma, and quick to adapt. He may not have been the first or even the most significant entrepreneur of his day. But what Lengel sees as mattering perhaps most is that by so visibly and personally taking on endeavors, backing creative and forward-looking plans, and always working

to manage public funds with integrity and care, Washington set a high profile example. The combination of Washington's example and his activity helped set the course for the nation and its culture. What Lengel wants us to see is that Washington's personal entrepreneurial outlook conditioned the kind of public figure he was, and in this way became first a part of how he governed, but eventually worked its way into the warp and weft of American culture.

The book follows the traditional outlines of the Washington biography; that is to say, the highlights and various tacks and turns will be well known to all familiar with this famous life story. Because the spotlight remains on Washington throughout, those seeking a review of the costs of Washington's activities on others—Africans and Indians, for example—must look elsewhere. Instead, what Lengel provides is an exploration of how the entrepreneurial side of Washington's character created policy and action that shaped events.

As a youth Washington had the example of his father's and brothers' tobacco and land dealings. His connection to the powerful Fairfax family set him on course to gain his first fortune in western lands. Despite the physical and financial stress of the Seven Years' War, Washington rebounded with an advantageous marriage placing in his hand a large tobacco empire. Washington's willingness to shift his acres from tobacco to wheat was a move that tripled the land's worth. Spinning wool, harvesting fish, milling grain, and eventually distilling whiskey were all ventures that came one after another as Washington tirelessly pushed the edges of his property's possibilities. As president he called for canals, roads, and trade, and championed a stable financial system that would allow others to grow as he did.

Of special interest to readers of this H-Net network will be the way that Lengel covers Washington's management of finances during his generalship. Washington famously struggled through-

out the war with Congress over the focus and extent of their support. He was a promoter of economies and an opponent of waste, and also was dismayed by and deeply disapproving of self-interest. The nation's cause needed selflessness, and the dubious motives of those seeking to enrich themselves through the needs of his army or the public purse were maddening. To head off greed and corruption, the general often managed his army's affairs himself; his entrepreneurial mind and experience made him well equipped to do so. Washington's concern to protect the rights of property while on campaign, and his preferring the comparatively gentle hand of market forces over the far heavier (and commonly used) option of outright armed confiscation, was more than a mere policy. For Lengel, this not only locked the British out of local markets, increasing their reliance on long and challenging supply lines, but also built an important bond between local Americans and Washington's army. It would have been so easy for the people themselves to come to resent a marauding army living off of their own wealth, and all supposedly in their name and interest. Such a reality would have been fatal to the revolutionary cause—and in the long run most likely to Washington himself as well. Instead, Washington made sure that the cause, the army, the people, and the economy harmonized as much as possible. In *First Entrepreneur*, Lengel shows that this sort of meeting of instinct, inclination, and action was central to what made Washington the indispensable man and it was this character itself that helped establish a national culture that has long enshrined entrepreneurial spirit.

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