

HIS EXCELLENCY: GEORGE WASHINGTON¹

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*[Tanacharison] stepped up to where Jumonville lay, in French declared, "Thou art not yet dead, my father," then sank his hatchet into Jumonville's head, split his skull in half, pulled out his brain, and washed his hands in the mixture of blood and tissue. His warriors then fell upon the wounded French soldiers, scalped them all, and decapitated one and put his head on a stake. All this happened under the eyes of the shocked and hapless commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Washington.*³

Prefacing the above by saying, "there is good reason to believe that [Washington] found himself overseeing a massacre,"⁴ George Washington biographer Joseph J. Ellis presents this grisly literary snapshot of Washington's first combat experience barely a dozen pages into the first chapter of *His Excellency: George Washington*.⁵ Whether Ellis opens his story of one of America's most revered icons in such controversial fashion in order to set himself apart from the rest of Washington's biographers or for some other reason, he certainly grabs the reader's attention. Having done so, he embarks on an informative and entertaining journey through Washington's life that will likely satisfy a casual reader, but will probably frustrate a more serious student of history.

His Excellency has four major strengths. First, despite what the reader may think after reading the macabre depiction of Washington's first combat action described above and the implication that Washington was complicit in a heinous crime, the book is not merely Ellis's platform to attack Washington, but rather a balanced depiction of Washington and his life.⁶ Although Ellis says in his preface that, "we should begin our quest looking for a man rather than a statue, and any statues we do encounter should be quickly knocked off their pedestals,"⁷ he is careful to add that, "[o]ur goal should be to see Washington face-to-face—or, if you will, as grown-ups rather than children."⁸ On the whole, he accomplishes both of his stated goals. The book is a balanced effort that does not hesitate to point out what Ellis sees as Washington's flaws and human failings, but also pays great tribute to the man, presenting him as "the Foundingest Father of them all."⁹

The second strength of *His Excellency* is Ellis's attempt to suggest linkages between the various points on the trajectory of Washington's life, thereby weaving the stages of Washington's life into a more coherent whole. Ellis starts down this path by positing that Washington's personal experiences with the British Empire led him to cast his lot with the colonists who advocated a break from Great Britain.

While we cannot know, at least in the fullest and deepest sense, where that voice inside himself originated [condemning British measures as "repugnant to every principle of natural justice" in 1774], it does seem to echo the resentful voice of the young colonel in the Virginia Regiment, bristling at the condescending ignorance of Lord Loudoun and the casual rejection of his request for a regular commission in the British army. It harks back to the voice of the master of Mount Vernon, lured by Cary & Company [a London mercantile house] . . . into a mercantile system apparently designed to entrap him in a spiraling network of debt. . . . The voice also resonates with the same outraged frustration he felt whenever some distant and faceless British official, the most recent version of the vile breed being Earl Hillsborough, blocked his claim

¹ JOSEPH J. ELLIS, *HIS EXCELLENCY: GEORGE WASHINGTON* (2004).

² U.S. Army. Written while assigned as a student, 55th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

³ ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 14.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.* at 14-15.

⁷ *Id.* at xii.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.* at xiv.

for western lands, allegedly to protect Indian rights but more probably, he believed, to reserve the land for London cronies.¹⁰

Having chosen the colonists' side, Washington found himself the Continental Congress' unanimous selection as commander in chief of the fledgling Continental Army in 1775.¹¹ Ellis concludes that Washington was the obvious choice for the job because, "the appointment of a Virginian was politically essential in order to assure the allegiance of the most populous and wealthiest colony to the cause, and Washington was unquestionably the most eligible and qualified Virginian."¹² Ellis then connects two more dots when he argues that Washington's experiences with the Continental Army during the war shaped his thinking about the proper role of the federal government in America.

In 1777 he began the practice of sending routine Circulars to the States requesting money, supplies, and fresh recruits, his implicit recognition that ultimate power over these essentials lay with the state governments. By 1780 his growing sense of desperation pushed him over the edge as he became an outspoken advocate for expanded powers at the national level. "Certain I am," he informed one Virginia delegate in the Congress, "that unless Congress speaks in a more decisive tone; unless they are vested with powers by the several States competent to the great purposes of War, or assume them as a matter of right . . . that our Cause is lost. We can no longer drudge on in the old way. I see one head gradually changing into thirteen." The Congress needed to do more than recommend; it needed to dictate. "In a word," he complained, "our measures are not under the influence and direction of one council, but thirteen, each of which is actuated by local views and politics." If the Congress failed to expand its mandate and become a true national government, he warned, "it will be madness in us, to think of prosecuting the War."¹³

At least partly as a result of these experiences, Ellis says, Washington decided to attend the Constitutional Convention as a member of the Virginia delegation.¹⁴ He ended up chairing the Convention and became the "inevitable and unanimous selection as the first president of the United States."¹⁵ In sum, although he never says so directly, Ellis appears to argue that Washington's experiences with the British Empire during his early years led directly to his experiences during the American Revolution, which led directly to his experiences during the formative years of the American republic. Whether or not the reader agrees with this line of reasoning or the connections that Ellis finds, this synthesizing feature of the book is one of its great strengths.

The third strength of *His Excellency* is Ellis's thoughtful reminders that that way we see events today is not necessarily the way they were seen at the time they occurred. For example, he says of Washington's life following the Revolution but before the Constitutional Convention, "[h]indsight permits us to regard Washington's postwar years at Mount Vernon as a mere interlude between two major chapters of active service But Washington himself experienced these years as an epilogue rather than an interlude. . . . His public career, he firmly believed, was over, his life nearly so."¹⁶ An even better example occurs later: "Washington's core achievement as president, much as it had been as commander in chief of the Continental army, was to transform the improbable into the inevitable."¹⁷ This simple yet eloquent sentence merits high praise. It is both a powerful tribute and a well-written reminder that the march of history is not inevitable; in fact, events now taken for granted as almost predestined could well have transpired differently under slightly different conditions. Both quoted passages invite the reader to reflect on the idea that hindsight, while it may not always be 20/20, is certainly a different prism than that of the period being studied. This idea is well worth a few moments' thought, and *His Excellency* illustrates it nicely.

The fourth strength of *His Excellency* is its presentation of lesser-known facts about Washington and his life and times. For example, Ellis writes, "Bache subsequently launched a direct assault on Washington's character by printing documents

¹⁰ *Id.* at 63-64.

¹¹ *Id.* at 67-68.

¹² *Id.* at 68.

¹³ *Id.* at 127.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 175.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 171.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 150.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 188-189.

purporting to show that the president had accepted a bribe from the British early in the Revolutionary War, so that all along he had really been a British spy in the Benedict Arnold mode.”¹⁸ It is interesting to think, over two hundred years after the fact, that someone so widely respected in the modern era faced such a malicious attack in the press during his lifetime. Another interesting tidbit that Ellis chooses to illuminate involves Thomas Jefferson and his later relationship with Washington. “Even though Jefferson had been describing him in private correspondence as quasi-senile”¹⁹ This development is arguably less well publicized than other facets of the relationship between Washington and Jefferson, but certainly an interesting revelation.

Despite the book’s strengths, its weaknesses are significant and detract a great deal from the overall quality of the work. The first weakness is Ellis’s tendency to draw historical conclusions without sufficiently explaining his support or rationale for those conclusions. For example, with regard to the events at Jumonville Glen (described in part in the opening quote), Ellis writes, “[t]hrough the eyewitness accounts do not agree—as they seldom do—the most plausible version of the evidence suggests that the French troops, surprised and outgunned, threw down their weapons after the initial exchange and attempted to surrender.”²⁰ Ellis makes no attempt to explain why he believes that this is the most plausible version of the evidence; furthermore, he cites none of the evidence upon which he presumably relied. Similarly, he writes later, “[Washington’s] association with the Society of the Cincinnati clashed with his chief preoccupation, which was the courting of posterity’s judgment”²¹ Ellis again makes no attempt to explain why he believes that Washington’s chief preoccupation at the time was the verdict of history and again cites no support. A final example: “[Washington] regarded his symbolic role as the core function of his presidency.”²² Again, Ellis provides no support for his conclusion. These examples are not all-inclusive, and Ellis’s failure to explain the support for and reasoning behind his conclusions is a major flaw in this book. He may have excellent reasons and copious support for his conclusions, but he generally does not discuss either, and the reader is left to wonder.

The book’s second major weakness is Ellis’s occasionally suspect documentation practices. For example, in describing President Washington’s policy toward Indian tribes in America, Ellis writes, “A more coercive policy of outright confiscation, Washington believed, would constitute a moral failure that ‘would stain the character of the nation.’”²³ While the sentence construction may lead the reader to believe that the language suggesting a stain on the nation’s character came from Washington, the endnote reveals that Henry Knox penned this phrase in a letter to Washington.²⁴ Another glaring example of questionable documentation is Ellis’s use throughout the book of what he styles “sightings.”²⁵ These “sightings” paint vivid and dramatic pictures of various events from Washington’s life, like the following.

Sighting: March 16, 1783[.] Washington has just entered the New Building at Newburgh, a large auditorium recently built by the troops and also called The Temple. About 500 officers are present in the audience. Horatio Gates is chairing the meeting, a rich irony since Gates is most probably complicitous in the plot to stage a military coup that Washington has come to quash. Everything has been scripted and orchestrated beforehand. Washington’s aides fan out into the audience to prompt applause for the general’s most crucial lines. Washington walks slowly to the podium and reaches inside his jacket to pull out his prepared remarks. Then he pauses—the gesture is almost certainly planned—and pulls from his waistcoat a pair of spectacles recently sent to him by David Rittenhouse, the Philadelphia scientist. No one has ever seen Washington wear spectacles before on public occasions. He looks out to his assembled officers while adjusting the new glasses and says: “Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray, but almost blind in the service of my country.” Several officers begin to sob. The speech itself is anti-climactic. All thoughts of a military coup die at that moment.²⁶

¹⁸ *Id.* at 231.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* at 14.

²¹ *Id.* at 160.

²² *Id.* at 197.

²³ *Id.* at 212.

²⁴ *Id.* at 307 n.36.

²⁵ *See, e.g., id.* at 119.

²⁶ *Id.* at 143-44.

The manner in which this “sighting” is written suggests that it was written by a single third-party observer who was present to witness the event. The endnote to the passage above cites only the text of Washington’s address and a letter from Washington to David Rittenhouse, the scientist mentioned in the “sighting.”²⁷ In other words, although the historical facts are apparently accurate, Ellis employs a misleading storytelling device in his quest to make an already compelling story even more so. This is not the only such flawed “sighting.”²⁸ This literary artifice is unnecessary, and it seriously detracts from the quality of Ellis’s work, as does the other poor documentation noted above.

The final weakness of *His Excellency* is its failure to answer the book’s central question. In the preface, Ellis writes:

I also began my odyssey with a question that had formed in my mind on the basis of earlier research in the papers of the revolutionary generation. It seemed to me that Benjamin Franklin was wiser than Washington; Alexander Hamilton was more brilliant; John Adams was better read; Thomas Jefferson was more intellectually sophisticated; James Madison was more politically astute. Yet each and all of these prominent figures acknowledged that Washington was their unquestioned superior. Within the gallery of greats so often mythologized and capitalized as Founding Fathers, Washington was recognized as *primus inter pares*, the Foundingest Father of them all. Why was that?²⁹

Ellis never explicitly answers this thesis question, and the reader is left to speculate. He does refer repeatedly to Washington’s willingness to surrender authority at the end of his various terms of service; for example, his retirement to private life at the end of the American Revolution and his refusal to accept a third presidential term.³⁰ However, Ellis never says directly that this practice of self-denial was what made Washington greatest among the Founding Fathers, and in fact, he argues at one point that “all the surrenders paved the way to larger acquisitions”³¹ Although this last argument appears to weaken the proposition that Ellis discusses Washington’s surrenders of power so often and in such detail because he believed that they were what made Washington the greatest of his generation, I could find no other plausible answer to the question. Even Thomas Jefferson, despite his apparent break with Washington toward the end of Washington’s life, had no difficulty answering the question of why Washington was the greatest.³²

On the whole, his character was, in its mass, perfect, in nothing bad, in few points indifferent; and it may truly be said, that never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great, and to place him in the same constellation with whatever worthies have merited from man an everlasting remembrance. For his was the singular destiny and merit, of leading the armies of his country successfully through an arduous war, for the establishment of its independence; of conducting its councils through the birth of a government, new in its forms and principles, until it had settled down into a quiet and orderly train; and of scrupulously obeying the laws through the whole of his career, civil and military, of which the history of the world furnishes no other example. . . .³³

Perhaps Washington’s repeated surrender of power is the reason that Ellis believes he was the greatest, and perhaps not, but the fact remains that Ellis does not clearly answer his central question, and that seriously detracts from the overall quality of his work.

His Excellency is highly readable, entertaining, and informative. Reading this book was an enjoyable experience and provided insight into several aspects of Washington’s life and times that were novel to me. A casual student of history will likely find the book worthwhile, but a serious student should look elsewhere, because as a scholarly work, *His Excellency* suffers from several serious flaws. Ellis’s failure to clearly answer his thesis question, his poor documentation, and his

²⁷ *Id.* at 299 n.59.

²⁸ *See, e.g., id.* at 103-104, 294 n.45.

²⁹ *Id.* at xiii-xiv.

³⁰ *See, e.g., id.* at 139, 274.

³¹ *Id.* at 274.

³² *Id.* at 231-32.

³³ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Walter Jones (Jan. 2, 1814), in THOMAS JEFFERSON, WRITINGS, at 1318-1321 (Merrill Peterson ed., 1984), available at <http://www.pbs.org/georgewashington/father/qualities.html>.

failure to explain the basis for many of his conclusions are serious scholarly lapses. These lapses are a dark cloud that cast a long shadow over the entire book.