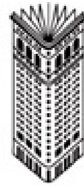
THE ASCENT OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

The Hidden Political Genius of an American Icon

JOHN FERLING



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For Carol, who has always supported and encouraged my work

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Preface

There were differences in the politics of eighteenth-century America and those of today, but not a many as might be thought. Political practices were strikingly modern. Elections determined who he most offices. Candidates courted the voters much as they do today, albeit not with television or th Web. Once national politics emerged, with the Continental Congress in 1774, politicians then, a today, represented their colony, district, or state. Woe to any officeholder who betrayed the powerfu interests that dominated the state that had elected him. Political parties had come into existence by th early 1790s. By then, too, politicians went after their political adversaries with a predatory gusto th was at least as savage as exists today, charging them with hypocrisy, branding them as dangerou radicals, fixating on their war record (or lack thereof), searching for hints of personal scandal- something like an extramarital affair or financial malfeasance—that might prove to be political ruinous.

Even the broad contours of that time bore a resemblance to what has been experienced by rece generations of Americans. A great decisive war—the French and Indian War in their age, World Wa II in modern America—set the stage for a period of epic change and reform (the American Revolutio after 1776, the civil rights revolution and the counterculture and feminist movements in the 1960s ar 1970s), followed by a long, pivotal struggle between progressives and conservatives to determine ho much of the earlier sweeping change would endure. In the first party battles of the new Americ Republic, the most conservative faction embraced a military hero—something conservatives would c from time to time with other soldiers, as well as with famous athletes and movie stars—not on claiming him as their own, but portraying him as interested only in the national welfare. In short, the hero was characterized as above politics, a slant that would often be repeated in American politic history, though never again so successfully.

In our time no individual played an important role in each of the three stages, but, incredibly, in th second half of the eighteenth century, George Washington occupied a crucial post during ever towering event. He led Virginia's army in the French and Indian War, commanded the Continenta army in the Revolutionary War, presided over the Constitutional Convention, and served two terms a president beginning in 1789.

Most of Washington's contemporaries thought him uniquely above politics, or "disinterested," a they put it, meaning that he made decisions judiciously, letting the chips fall where they may witho regard to sectional, provincial, or personal interest. Alone among the nation's public official Washington was thought to see things only through the prism of what was best for the United State They additionally believed that Washington did nothing to advance his reputation.

Could this be true? Could Washington have been so different from others of his time? At the time c his death in 1799, Washington had been a public official for much of the preceding fifty years. Had h been above politics throughout his public life? Was he ever above politics? What, if anything, di Washington do to elevate his standing in the eyes of his countrymen?

During the last twenty years of his public life—from the Valley Forge winter in 1778 onward– Washington was regarded as an Olympian figure and was revered by many. Washington' contemporaries often spoke of him as godlike, a view fostered by such nineteenth-centu hagiographers as Parson Weems and John Marshall. No other Founder was thought of in that mann —nor were any of Washington's successors. Even today, Washington stands apart from most c America's cherished heroes. His image adorns our currency and military medals. Upward of a millic

people annually visit his home, Mount Vernon, a larger number than trek to the residence of any othe American leader. At Mount Vernon's gift shop and elsewhere, shoppers can find china embellishe with the image of a mythical Washington praying in the snow at Valley Forge, and children's book abound that depict him as flawless. Television channel surfers occasionally come across adulator made-for-television movies that portray Washington as heroic and his contemporary critics a menaces to civilization. Washington may not be regarded as godlike today, but his popular imag remains that of a demigod.

Serious scholars have long since moved past hagiography, and for more than a century they hav sought to discover the unvarnished Washington. Biographers have rummaged through the broa features of his life, while other historians have dug into his nooks and crannies, exploring Washingto as a soldier, slave owner, parent and husband, entrepreneur, and president. Nothing has attracted mor attention than Washington's character.

On the other hand, nothing about Washington has attracted less attention than his political activitie Though Washington served in the Virginia assembly for nearly twenty years before the War o Independence, his legislative career has been passed over with insufficient scrutiny. Save for the so called Conway Cabal in 1778 and the Newburgh Affair in 1783, General Washington's wartim political activities have gone largely unnoticed.

As for his presidency, Washington—even in the hands of the best historians—has by and larg continued to be seen as above politics, much as he was thought to have been at the time of his deat James Thomas Flexner, perhaps Washington's foremost biographer, portrayed the first president a devoid of any partisan agenda. Washington, Flexner wrote in the 1970s, consciously sought a midwa point between partisan extremes, as he saw himself as "the keystone of an arch, holding all uprig and in equilibrium."[1] Douglas Southall Freeman, in an encyclopedic seven-volume biography th appeared in the 1940s and 1950s, had already taken a similar stance. Freeman portrayed Preside Washington as the great mediator, striving to stay above politics by reducing personal animositie between the right-wing Alexander Hamilton and the left-wing Thomas Jefferson in order "to preve damage to the new government."[2]

Freeman's and Flexner's themes of Washington's disinterestedness were echoed by the contemporary, John Miller. In an influential political history of the 1790s, Miller, a distinguishe historian, wrote that Washington, believing that "Jefferson and Hamilton had the same end in view tried "to mark out a line by which both could walk in peace and understanding" witho "endanger[ing] the existence of the Federal government."[3] Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, who couple of generations later coauthored their own notable history of the politics of the Federalis dominated 1790s, had another take. Washington, they concluded, was pre-modern in his thinkin Abhorring partisanship as "destructive," he instead "worked out for himself" a role of standi "resolutely above all party and faction."[4]

Some scholars have detected partisanship in Washington's actions but have appeared to b unwilling to acknowledge it. Joseph Charles, the author of an influential study on the origin political parties in the United States, fancifully suggested that Washington "is to be blamed not fo aligning himself with a party, but for not knowing that he had done so."[5] Richard Hofstadter, one o the most important historians of the last century, attributed Washington's partisanship to "intellectu confusion." Washington really did not want to side with either the Federalist Party or the Republica Party, Hofstadter wrote; the president wished only to restore "that spirit of happy unanimity which ha been manifested in his own [unanimous] election."[6] Marcus Cunliffe, who a half century ago penne an authoritative assessment of Washington the man and leader, surmised that by the time of h

presidency, Washington's private self had vanished and he had come to see himself as the real-lif Cincinnatus, the "hero and emblem" who may have acted in a partisan manner but who sincere believed that his every action was taken only in the national interest.[7] In his wonderful book o presidential courage, historian Michael Beschloss wrote that "Washington's dream" was "tha America might forever be governed by natural consensus—no parties, no factions, just patriots," an that he did all within his power to make his dream a reality.[8] Peter Henriques, a friend of mine wh may know more about Washington than any scholar, has written that the first president's only goal were "to bind America together" and "to secure the union."[9] Jay Winik, in a recent engaging accou of the birth of the modern world, portrayed Washington as selflessly acting and thinking "in cosm terms," making himself into "a sovereign" entity and the very "embodiment of the nation itself.' Joseph Ellis, in his important 2004 biography of Washington, contended that Washington forged "Fabian presidency." Washington tried his best to remain "above the fray," but when he did lea toward the policies of the Federalist Party, he acted cautiously and wisely, seeking to restrai partisanship lest the party's actions would "push federal sovereignty further . . . than public opinio allowed.[11]

These writers are excellent historians who have written good history. This book, however, take issue with their portrayal of Washington as nonpolitical and steadfastly seeking to stay above politic I believe that George Washington was highly political. He was confronted with politics and politician when, as a young man, he commanded Virginia's army in the French and Indian War. To be sure, h was political during the more than fifteen years that he sat in Virginia's House of Burgesses before th American Revolution. Some choices that he made as commander of the Continental army we political in nature. General Washington shrewdly employed his political dexterity to successfull manage relations with a fractious, meddlesome Continental Congress and irascible state officials. master of political infighting, he outmaneuvered rival generals and defused dissent from those belo him. Washington was decidedly partisan in the movement to write and ratify the Constitution. H came to the presidency with a political agenda in mind. Yes, Washington claimed—often and loudl —that he was not a politician, but not everything that he said should be taken at face value. He was highly political individual, one of the very best politicians in American history. George Washingto was so good at politics that he alone of all of America's public officials in the past two centuri succeeded in convincing others that he was not a politician.

That Washington was not disinterested does not detract from his standing. In some ways, it shoul enhance his reputation. Rather than being seen as someone who did not know what he was doing who was filled with self-delusions, the Washington in this book repeatedly comes to a reasone judgment on complex issues and forges a strategy for their realization.

One other thing. An exploration of Washington's life in politics, which heretofore has escape penetrating scrutiny, will, I believe, open a new window through which he can be seen. It will afford more rounded picture of Washington, a real-life person with real political interests, passions, agenda and attachments, a man whose stature was elevated to the heights by conscious political decisions, an a man who, with unparalleled canniness, pursued politics to further his interests.

As a scholar, I first encountered Washington early in my career when writing a book about earl American warfare. His name kept cropping up. Wanting to know more about him, I began a biograph and in 1988 *The First of Men: A Life of George Washington* appeared. Thereafter, I turned to oth things, including a biography of John Adams and a history of America's colonial wars. But after dozen years or so, I came back to Washington. Intrigued by books on comparative history, I decided t explore three Founders—Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson—by contrasting the

behavior in the American Revolution. While writing that book, *Setting the World Ablaze* (2000), I w surprised to discover that by looking at Washington in a comparative manner, I was led to as questions about him that I had not asked in the biography.

Now I have come back to George Washington once again, this time to examine him as a politicia and I believe, as with my earlier comparative history, that writing this book has led me to ask ne questions that have resulted in fresh insights.

This book is not a biography. It has little to say about Washington's relationship with his wife an stepchildren, his amusements, or the conditions faced by his slaves, to name just a few things that biographer would wish to explore. I have focused specifically on matters that somehow or oth involved Washington in political activities. And as character is important in how public officials ar seen, and in the decisions they make, this book additionally seeks to understand what shaped ar drove Washington and how his character influenced his political choices.

A book entitled *The Ascent of George Washington* of course also looks into Washington's rise, wh he did—and what was done for him, by whom, and for what reasons—to facilitate his ascent in America's pantheon of heroes.

A word about technique. Throughout the book I have used the spelling that appears in the primar sources, doing so from a belief that this will afford readers a better look at the author of th documents and provide some flavor of the times themselves.

I owe a debt of gratitude to many people who helped with the writing and completion of this book. am especially indebted to two good friends, Matt deLesdernier and Jim Sefcik, who read th manuscript and offered thoughtful suggestions and helpful criticism. Robert Previdi deserves some the credit, or blame, for the book, as he suggested back in 2005 that I consider writing a book o Washington's life in politics. Many people responded to questions that I raised as the book proceede Philander Chase, Edward Lengel, Jennifer Wallach, Nancy Hayward, Edith Gelles, Arthur Lefkowit Beth Prindle, and John Folmar dropped what they were doing to search out answers to my question The book would not have been possible without the assistance of Angela Mehaffy, director o interlibrary loan at the Irvine Sullivan Ingram Library at the University of West Georgia, wh cheerfully ordered tons of books for me. I want to thank Sona Vogel, a wonderful copy editor; Pete Beatty, who answered many questions; my agent, Geri Thoma; and my editor, Peter Ginna, withou whom this book may never have come into being.

John Ferli
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See notes on Preface

Introduction

The Founding Father Who Wielded Power Without Ambition

It was the day after Christmas, but there were no signs of a holiday in Philadelphia. December 2
1799, had been set aside in the city as the day for a mock funeral to honor George Washington, wh
had passed away at Mount Vernon twelve days earlier. Congress had called for the funeral.
additionally asked that all Americans wear black armbands for the next thirty days and resolved
build a marble monument to Washington in the Federal City on the Potomac River, a site that man
Americans were already calling "Washington." On this day of mourning, the front doors at th
President's House and Congress Hall were draped in black, as were businesses and churches and eve
ships in Philadelphia's harbor.

Public ceremonies customarily follow the demise of the famous. Sometimes the displays of gri
are more ritualistic than authentic, but Washington's death indisputably cast a mournful spell acros
the new American nation. As the first lady, Abigail Adams, noted, a "universal melancholy ha
pervaded all classes." When President John Adams passed on the news of Washington's demise to th
nation, he wrote in a heartfelt announcement that the American Republic had lost its "most esteeme
beloved, admired citizen."[1]

December 26 dawned gray and cold in Philadelphia, adding to the gloom of the business at han
Though Washington had been buried at Mount Vernon on December 18, it was fitting for Philadelphi
to host a grand memorial service. Not only was it still the nation's capital, but it was whe
Washington had spent nearly 10 percent of his life. He had served in the Continental Congress
Philadelphia in 1774 and 1775, and on several occasions during the long War of Independence he ha
returned for consultation with Congress. Twice during the war, he had ridden at the head of th
Continental army as it paraded through the streets of the city, first in 1777 as he prepared to defen
Philadelphia against the British army and again in 1781 en route to Yorktown, Virginia, and th
climactic battle of the war. Washington had returned for four months in 1787 to preside over th
Constitutional Convention, and he came back in 1790 as president of the United States.

Philadelphians awakened to artillery fire on this solemn day. All through the morning, at thirty
minute intervals, sixteen cannons, one for each state, boomed out homage to Washington. By la
morning, some ten thousand people, many dressed in black or festooned with sable armbands, sashe
or plumes in their hats, stood silently on the streets along the announced funeral route. At noon,
bells tolled in several churches and soldiers fired minute guns, the procession stepped off fro
Congress Hall. A trumpeter on horseback led the way, followed by cavalry and infantry uni
marching to the doleful cadence of muffled drums. Next came a spirited riderless horse, white lik
Washington's familiar parade mount, its hoofs reverberating loudly on Philadelphia's cobbleston
streets. It sported black trimming, including black and white feathers on its head. Fabric adorned wi
the image of the American eagle hung round the horse's massive chest. An empty saddle was strappe
to its back and reverse boots were in the stirrups. General Alexander Hamilton, the commander of th
Provisional army, and his staff followed, riding on horseback ahead of the pallbearers who carried th
empty, flag-draped casket. After the coffin came the cabinet, members of Congress and the Suprem
Court, and several others who had served under Washington in important posts. Local officia
brought up the rear. President and Mrs. Adams, who did not march, waited at the church for th
procession to arrive.

The procession came south on Fifth Street, turned onto Walnut, then moved slowly north on Fourt

until it reached the German Lutheran Church, chosen for this occasion not because Washington ha been Lutheran—he had usually worshipped in an Episcopalian church—but because it was the large church in the city, capable of holding up to four thousand people, as it would on this day.[2] It was da in the cavernous nave. Small candles, the only illumination, cast faint light, causing spectral shadov to dance on the walls.

The service was not brief. It lasted more than four hours, until deep into the somber afternoo There was music and a long sermon delivered by an Episcopalian bishop, and numerous eulogies we interspersed throughout. Whatever the bishop said was forgotten almost as soon as he finished. Sa for one eulogy, the same was true of all the obsequies pronounced that day. Only the eulogy of Henr Lee was remembered. A Virginia congressman, Lee had earlier served as a cavalry officer in th Revolutionary War and had come to be widely known as “Light Horse Harry.” Lee had seen a inordinate amount of combat in the late war and had won a reputation as one of America’s most darir soldiers. Following the war, he had written a history of the southern campaigns, of which he had bee a part. His history did not make for scintillating reading. But he was a better orator than writer; he w chosen to speak for that reason—and because, like most of the other eulogists, he was a staun member of the Federalist Party, which controlled Congress and with which Washington, who ha postured as a nonpartisan, had habitually sided.

Lee’s eulogy soon appeared in nearly every newspaper in the country and was available in twen separate pamphlets.[3] Like those of most public speakers of the day, Lee’s oratory was speckled wi flowery bombast. There were lines such as “Methinks I . . . hear falling from his [Washington’s venerable lips” the admonition to “Be American, in thought, word, and deed.” Lee enumerate Washington’s many virtues, including “his clear and penetrating mind, a strong and sound judgmen calmness and temper for deliberation, with invincible firmness and perseverance,” and above all h “dignified and commanding” presence. It was as if heaven had fashioned Washington and given hi to America. Without General Washington, Lee said, the war could not have been won. With Presiden Washington, the nation had been saved from a potentially disastrous foreign war and internal disco had been quelled.

Lee’s oration lasted nearly twenty-five minutes, and from it came a single line that stood out—tha in fact, would be remembered above all the thousands of ringing observations made in the tumult eulogies. In resounding tones, Lee declared that George Washington had been “first in war—first peace—and first in the hearts of his countrymen.”

To that enduring thought, Lee added another idea, one that would appear in virtually every funer oration given for the late Founder. Washington, Lee said, had always served and acted in a selfle manner. His intentions and his every action had sprung solely “from obedience to his country’s will.

The ceremony in Philadelphia was not the only memorial service for Washington. Soon after the nev arrived of Washington’s passing, rites were observed in every major American city and in many sma towns. Congress proclaimed February 22, Washington’s birthday, a day of national mourning, an memorial services were conducted on that day at many sites, including halls, muster grounds whe militia companies assembled, and Masonic temples, as Washington had been a member of th Masonic lodge in Alexandria, Virginia. A ceremony in New York City was held in a theater. The stag scene featured a tomb, a portrait of Washington swathed by a sword and shield, flags, an America eagle that wept tears of blood, a pyramid, and sixteen black banners, each inscribed in gold with th name of a state. Soon after the curtain rose, an actor appeared and read a long poem honorir Washington.

Normally, however, the pieties were offered by public officeholders, lawyers, soldiers, ar

clergymen, some of whom, realizing they were exalting a mortal, were decidedly uncomfortabl fretful that God might visit His wrath on America for such idolatry. No one will ever know how man eulogies were finally delivered for Washington, but 346 were printed and have survived.[5]

Common themes appeared in these eulogies. Washington's "first victory was over himself," as h had overcome his lack of formal education through a zeal for personal improvement. He had bee endowed by nature with attributes that enabled him to "over-awe" others, even to cause educated me to "sink unnerved" and "tremble" in his presence. His exemplary qualities included what one orat labeled "masculine features": rationalism, common sense, industry, and honesty. When called on t make an important decision, Washington had listened to advice, weighed the options, and made h choice only after careful deliberation. Not even the most gifted men were the equal of Washingto countless eulogists said. "In him," one speaker asserted, "all the qualities which constitute th excellence of man . . . were almost miraculously united and reconciled." Washington, it was ofte said, had been prudent without being timid, cautious but lionhearted. Fear never vanquished courag in this man. But what made Washington so imposing, and so successful, according to many eulogist was his ability to keep his passions in check. His self-control permitted his other virtues to flouris for naturally dangerous inclinations were always "obedient to his stronger mind." This quality, the said, had set Washington apart from all the great heroes of other times and other societies. Nearl every eulogist mentioned that Washington not only had never abused the power vested in him, he ha surrendered power at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War and again after two terms as presiden Washington, many said, had been "incorruptible." So extraordinary was Washington that som insisted he had been lent to America by God, and several eulogists declared him to be the America Moses—the man who saved his countrymen from foreign "bondage," leading them "thro' seas o blood" to liberty. Washington had made "a nation great, independent and happy."[6]

But once these myriad virtues had been cataloged, nearly every eulogist agreed that Washington ha displayed a further quality, a trait that superseded all others, the unassailable attribute that had set hi apart from all men and ultimately made him a great man. A patriot with a "truly paternal" love for h country, Washington had always acted from "disinterestedness." "This was greatness! This wa patriotism indeed," one orator declared. Many proclaimed that "power . . . had no charm for him," th "personal aggrandizement" was never "his object" when he held public office. He took on authori only when his countrymen asked him to do so, and he exercised power only to secure the "happine of mankind." Always, his service was that of a patriot answering the call to duty. Said one eulogis "He was a MAN, the best friend of man, and everything wearing the form or feature of humanity, mu feel a pride in being called his kinsman," for Washington had wielded "power without ambition."[7]

The consensus of the speakers shone with the clarity of crystal. Washington's "scattered virtues . . shine[d] in separate stars" that "shall never be again collected in one glorious constellation."[8] Nev again would there be an equal of Washington. Someday, perhaps, someone would emerge who was a wise and brave, but it was not likely that America would ever again find a leader who exhibited all th wonderful qualities that Washington had possessed and who also was, like the country's Foundin Father, a patriot devoid of personal ambition.

This was not where the fabrication of the fable of George Washington began. Mythmaking abou Washington had begun in the depths of despair during the Revolutionary War and had gaine momentum in the tremulous years that followed, as the very existence of the young America Republic hung in the balance.

The real Washington burned with ambition: ambition for his country, to be sure, but also fo renown, power, wealth, and success. That he was able to fulfill these ambitions in commanding th

Continental army through a long, grueling revolutionary war, and then in steadying the new nation a
it struggled to stand on its feet, was perhaps the sign of George Washington’s greatness.

What can be seen in Washington with great clarity is that his overweening ambition was visib
from an early age.

See notes on Introduction

Part One

Rise from Obscurity

1

Soldier for Virginia: An Introduction to Politics

Like Terry Malloy, the pug in the movie *On the Waterfront* who wanted to be somebody, youn George Washington wanted to go places, to be known, to win acclaim. At his birth in 1732, George prospects were poor. He was a product of his father's second marriage. The sons from the fir marriage, George's half-brothers, had been provided a formal education, including study abroad. The also received a bountiful inheritance when their father, Augustine Washington, died in 1743. Bu Augustine's demise appeared to stop George's ascent before it began. There was no money fo continuing George's formal education, much less for sending him to England to complete h schooling, and his inheritance was meager. George received ten slaves and Ferry Farm, a worn-o tract across the Rappahannock River from Fredericksburg, Virginia.[1] With that bequest he mig become an important figure in King George County, though no one in the broader world would kno him. But from an early age, George Washington wanted more. He wanted to stand apart from other He wanted to be seen as a man of substance.

George said almost nothing about his father, mentioning him in only three passing references thousands of pages of correspondence.[2] Augustine had accumulated a small fortune as a tobacc planter, land speculator, and proprietor of an iron forge, and he was a prominent figure in norther Virginia, where he held several local offices. Ambitious young males usually aspire to surpass th accomplishments of their fathers, and that appears to have been true of George. Yet it was no Augustine who was George's role model. It was Lawrence Washington, an older brother from the father's first marriage.

Fourteen years older than George, Lawrence had studied in England. After returning home, enlisted as an officer in a colonial army raised to fight alongside British regulars in a war with Spai the oddly named War of Jenkins' Ear that erupted in 1739. Lawrence was sent to the Caribbean, the to South America, where he experienced combat. The war was a bloodbath for the American troop and Lawrence was fortunate to survive and return home. Worldly, educated, well-to-do, dashing in h resplendent uniform, and deferred to as a hero by the most influential men and captivating women Virginia, Lawrence cut an impressive figure. His stature increased when he was appointed adjuta general of Virginia, a post that made him the foremost soldier in the province. Soon, he was elected the House of Burgesses, Virginia's assembly, a feat never realized by Augustine. The crowning touc came in 1743. Lawrence married into the Fairfax family, which claimed title to six million acres Virginia and, needless to say, was the most prominent clan in the Northern Neck, the area around th Rappahannock and Potomac rivers. Lawrence and his bride took up residence on a lush green rollin estate overlooking the Potomac River. Having inherited the property from his father, Lawrence name his country farmhouse in honor of a British officer under whom he had recently served. He called Mount Vernon.[3]

When George was just entering adolescence, Lawrence issued him a standing invitation to vis Mount Vernon. George came as often as his mother would permit him to make the thirty-five-mi trek. At Mount Vernon, as well as at Belvoir, the Fairfaxes' neighboring estate only seven miles away George discovered a world that he had never known. Although Mount Vernon may not have bee larger than Ferry Farm, it must have been more elegantly furnished. Belvoir, on the other hand, was

grand structure, an architectural showcase gracefully adorned with exquisite molding and ric paneling and decorated tastefully with furniture and accessories from England. But it was not just th homes that excited young George. He was stirred by the people in them. People of influence visite Mount Vernon and Belvoir. Likely for the first time, George found himself in the presence of adul who were well-read and thoughtful, men who were accustomed to wielding power and hobnobbin with those who exercised even greater authority, men and women who comfortably exhibite cultivated manners. All of them, or so it must have seemed, were wealthy and enjoyed an opule lifestyle, and all venerated Lawrence, who wore his splendid uniform on special occasions.

Adolescents have always studied the world about them and dreamed of their future. Youn Washington was no exception. Early in his teenage years, Washington not only came to see Lawrenc as the embodiment of the most worthy qualities, but knew that he wished to attain the exalted status those who frequented Mount Vernon and Belvoir. Through observation and self-study, Washington se about doing what he could to put himself on an equal plane with those he admired. In adolescence, l underwent a metamorphosis from a callow youth into a more polished young man who could easi and comfortably fit into the world of the planter aristocracy and who was able to interact more easi and confidently with those who exercised considerable political power. George quietly watched an listened to others. He gained a knowledge of what to say in certain situations and, probably painfull discovered that at times the safest course was to say nothing. He learned etiquette as well, some of from the *Rules of Civility, and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation*, a century-o collection of 110 maxims of gentlemanly behavior that he found somewhere and copied in his ow hand. The guidebook included useful admonitions about such things as not spitting, picking teet biting nails, or scratching one's private parts in public, but it also stressed the importance controlling one's temper, exhibiting modesty, and acting with civility toward others, especially one social inferiors.[4]

Guided in all likelihood by Lawrence, and drawn to read what he heard others mention, youn Washington was shaped to some degree by his self-study. Based on works that he alluded to from tim to time later in life, he appears to have been especially influenced by *Seneca's Morals*, a compilatio of essays on ethical behavior by the first-century Roman philosopher, and by *Cato*, Joseph Addison early-eighteenth-century drama about the Roman republican who had chosen suicide over submissi to Caesar. *Seneca's Morals* emphasized that success in part hinged on the virtues of sacrifice, tenacit courage, restraint, and the control of one's emotions. Addison's *Cato* not only linked success wi service and devotion to one's country but taught that one must be deserving of success.[5]

Refined behavior alone would not assure Washington a place in the world of the gentry. Wealth or formal education would open doors, but Washington possessed neither. The right marriage could lea to upward mobility, and marrying well had been a habit among George's forebears. But with neithe money nor an education, the odds were long against young Washington marrying above himself. Tw other avenues could facilitate upward mobility. Lawrence's example demonstrated that a man coul go places quickly through military service, though in these years peace prevailed and Virginia did n trouble itself with the expense of an unnecessary army. Young Washington was in a hurry, so much s that at age fourteen he sought to enter Great Britain's Royal Navy as a commissioned officer. H mother, Mary Ball Washington, thought it a "very bad Scheme" and refused to assent, which close that option.[6]

A slower second option was available to a man on the make. Knowledge of land surveying could l acquired through self-study. It was a respectable and often lucrative occupation in Washington Virginia, as the population was growing and new frontiers were opening steadily. An industriou surveyor could earn twice the income of a thriving tradesman such as a weaver or tanner. Furthermor

as money was scarce, surveyors were frequently paid with land, which in time could be turned in considerable wealth. Though surveying was not a rapid means of ascent, the careers of some surveyo demonstrated how such a vocation could lead to fortune and influence.[7] Young Washington began t study surveying.

Starting around age fifteen, George learned surveying through self-help books, such as *The Youn Man's Companion*, and it is probable that he was tutored by some of the surveyors employed by th Fairfaxes. At age sixteen, George first gained hands-on experience when he accompanied a Fairfa surveying team to a job in what then was the dark wilderness along the South Branch of the Potoma River. The very next year, 1749, George was appointed surveyor of Culpepper County. To become county surveyor, one ordinarily had to endure a lengthy apprenticeship and to have accumulate considerable experience running surveys. Young Washington had neither. Obtaining this post was hi introduction to politics, for he could not have gotten the position had not powerful patrons—doubtle Lawrence and the Fairfaxes—pulled the necessary strings. In the forty months that followed, Georg conducted dozens of surveys. Some were in the Shenandoah Valley, and many were farther west i present West Virginia, where he worked in dense forests and on the steep, slippery hills that hugge the Cacapon and Little Cacapon rivers. Many of his surveys were on land belonging to the Oh Company. That enterprise, created by some of Virginia's wealthiest men, including the governo many of the Fairfaxes, and two of George's older half-brothers, claimed to possess five hundre thousand acres in the West. By his twentieth birthday, George had acquired nearly twenty-fiv hundred acres on the Virginia frontier.[8]

By then, George had lost Lawrence, who died in 1752 of tuberculosis, a great killer of young peop at the time. Through Lawrence's will, George inherited property in Fredericksburg. What is mor even as Lawrence lay on his deathbed, George, though devoid of military experience, asked Virginia governor to appoint him adjutant for the Northern Neck. (With Lawrence's demise imminent, Virgin had abolished the position of adjutant general and broken the province into several military districts Once again, young Washington's powerful patrons interceded on his behalf, wielding their politic influence. Although he did not receive the position he wanted, George, who was only twenty years o age and had never soldiered, was vested with the rank of major and given command of th southernmost district.[9]

In the seven years since he had first met Lawrence and visited Mount Vernon, Washington ha taken giant steps to overcome the obscurity he had feared would be his destiny. His early ascent ha not just happened. His diligence and industry were important, and the excellent connections that h enjoyed—and which he no doubt cultivated assiduously—were crucial. But his patrons had not gone bat for him solely because of family ties and kindness. Young Washington was conspicuous. He wa physically imposing. He literally stood out because of his height. In an age when the median height f adult males was five feet seven inches—and the median for European-born males in the colonies w five feet four—Washington soared to six feet three and weighed roughly 175 pounds. An eyewitnes described the early twenty-something Washington as having a small, flat waist, broad shoulders, an long, muscular arms. Washington exhibited the striking look of what we would expect today in gifted athlete, and in fact, throughout his life numerous observers remarked on his agility, usual saying that he walked with a fluid, graceful saunter, and many described him as without an equal as horseman, a role that called for athleticism.

Just as today's extraordinary athletes, for better or worse, gain attention from their peers and ofte from doting adults, young Washington was set apart from other boys and young men his age, thoug not just in his physicality. Leaving nothing to chance, Washington had sought to cultivate thos qualities that might turn heads. He made an early habit of standing ramrod straight, dressed well an

fashionably, and learned to look others in the eye when speaking to them. One observer described ho
he trained his "blue gray penetrating eyes" on those whom he addressed. No one ever described h
eyes as soft or sensitive. Washington was not handsome, but he was striking, formidably so. H
exuded ruggedness and perhaps a slightly intimidating air, though there was sufficient polish to h
demeanor that he struck many as at once "engaging" and "composed and dignified." By his twent
first birthday, Washington had also gained some experience in leading others, having alread
commanded considerably older men who constituted the surveying parties that he took to the frontie
As Washington made the transition from adolescence to adulthood, he must have struck h
benefactors as ambitious, intelligent, eager to succeed, and willing to work hard. All in all, he was
polite young man who displayed charm as well as strength, tenacity, sturdiness, and vigor. He wa
what people sometimes refer to as a born leader, though in reality Washington was not born this way
He had taken what nature had given him and through observation, self-scrutiny, thoughtfulnes
perseverance, and industry reached a point that others saw him as a potential leader.[10]

Like all people, Washington was at the mercy of history. Had Virginia enjoyed a long generation o
peace when he came of age, Washington would not be known today. He would have surveyed an
farmed and been regarded by contemporaries in his neighborhood as successful. But the chances a
good that he would have done nothing that subsequent generations would have remembere
Washington must have prayed that fate would smile on him, as it had on Lawrence, giving him a
opportunity to do something extraordinary. In 1753, his opportunity arrived. Young Washington mad
the most of it.

War clouds were gathering for another British-French conflict. Those two great powers had fough
three wars in sixty years. Their most recent encounter had ended inconclusively, prompting many t
think that the belligerents had made peace in 1748 merely to catch their breath before renewin
hostilities. Those bitter rivals were antagonists in Europe, but also in myriad places around the glob
where their imperial interests collided. One such place was a region that Virginians called the Oh
Country—what Americans today generally refer to as the Midwest—the fertile, beckoning land
beyond the Appalachians and between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. France and Great Brita
each claimed the territory. Indeed, a portion of those frontier lands supposedly belonged to the Oh
Company, whose director after 1752 was the royal governor of Virginia, Robert Dinwiddie.

When France deployed an army in the Ohio Country in 1750, some in Virginia urged an arme
response. Dinwiddie, not eager to be blamed for starting a war, preferred first to consult London. B
1753, he had received his instructions. Crown officials told him that his first step should be to infor
the French of Britain's rightful claim to the region and to demand the removal of all French troop
For this, Dinwiddie needed a volunteer to carry his message. The mission would hardly be easy. Th
emissary would have to cross the mountains in late autumn and winter, entering a forebodin
wilderness inhabited by Indians who were mostly enemies of the British. In October, Georg
Washington came to Williamsburg, Virginia's capital, to volunteer.

Some public officials complained that Washington was too inexperienced for such a delica
mission, but Dinwiddie saw qualities that he liked in this young man.[11] Washington was one of th
province's adjutants. He had run nearly two hundred surveys, many in the rugged hilly noman's-lan
of western Virginia. Age, stamina, and experience in the wilds were on his side. He was closel
connected with the Fairfaxes, who were among Dinwiddie's associates in the Ohio Company. Colon
William Fairfax, the owner of Belvoir and a member of the Governor's Council, must have relishe
the prospect of having someone trustworthy go to the region and scout around a bit, keeping an eye o
for prize lands. He put in a word on Washington's behalf with the governor. On the last day o

October, with a foretaste of the looming winter already apparent on frosty mornings, Washington wa summoned by Dinwiddie to the expansive and elegant Governor's Palace and given the job of carryi the chief executive's letter to the French.

Nor was that all he was to do. Washington's instructions—which were written in part by Colon Fairfax—directed him to be a diplomat and spy as well. He was to meet with the chief of the Sene Indians, whom the English called "the Half-King." Tanacharison, as the sachem was known among h own people, was an occasional British ally. Washington was to visit his village, which lay abou twenty miles above the head of the Ohio River, and prepare the way for the Seneca to join with t English against the French. Washington was also told that when he reached the headquarters of t French army, he was to gather information on the size of the enemy force and the nature of i fortifications. Off the record, Washington was additionally instructed to reconnoiter the Forks of t Ohio, where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers met, for a site where Virginia might build a fo This was crucially important to the Ohio Company, whose charter, issued by the British governme required that it establish such an installation in order actually to gain legal title to the hundreds thousands of acres it coveted in the Ohio Country. That private and public interests should interse was as old as government itself, and there is no reason to believe that Washington was surprised find that such private pecuniary considerations were driving the policies of his colony's government.

Washington was eager to carry out his mission. He departed for the Ohio Country on the very day was commissioned. Accompanied by a party of six that included a translator, Indian traders, and gunsmith, Washington trekked across a corner of Maryland and into southern Pennsylvania, pressi onward from one brown ridgeline to another until, three weeks out from Alexandria, Virginia, reached the Forks of the Ohio. Traveling by foot and canoe, he explored the area carefully. It w snowing hard by the time the party pushed farther north to parley with the Seneca, and even cold when, on the final day of November, the men began the last arduous leg of their journey. The destination was Fort Le Boeuf, near Lake Erie and almost 150 miles above the Forks of the Ohi There, Washington hoped to meet with French officials.

A French army patrol intercepted the party of Virginians a few miles below Fort Le Boeu Fortunately for Washington, the soldiers were not trigger-happy. Following a brief discussion, the took the ragged band of Englishmen forward, even pausing in a driving snowstorm to permit Maj Washington to change from his buckskins and moccasins—attire that he called his "Indian walki Dress"—to the fashionable clothing of an English gentleman. The French at Fort Le Boeuf we gracious hosts. They wined and dined their guests for forty-eight hours and even provided them wi food and liquor for the return trip. While the French decided how to respond to Dinwiddie, they le Washington remarkably free to amble about, making mental notes of the fort and its garrison. Finall on the evening of December 14, the French commander handed Major Washington a sealed letter f Dinwiddie. While he did not know the contents of the communiqué, Washington had heard enou during the otherwise convivial dinner conversations to know that the French regarded the Oh Country as theirs by right of discovery and exploration. He knew, too, that the French response he w to carry back to Williamsburg almost certainly meant war.

To hasten their return home, the Virginia party divided up. Washington traveled with Christoph Gist, a veteran frontiersman. Their trek back to Virginia consumed barely a third the time of t journey out, though it proved to be infinitely more dangerous. Coming south from the ominous named hamlet of Murdering Town, a gun-toting "French Indian," as Washington later described hi fell in with the two Englishmen. After walking ahead of them for a spell, the warrior sudden wheeled and attempted to fire his single-shot handgun, but it misfired. Washington and Gi overpowered their assailant. Subsequently, both claimed that they disarmed the would-be killer a

“let him go.” Gist insisted that he “would have killed him; but the Major would not suffer me to ki him.”[13] The following day, Washington, gaunt and exhausted from the rigors of the punishin expedition—Gist described him as “much fatigued” and “very weary”—fell off a raft into the swolle ice-logged Allegheny River. He might have drowned or died of hypothermia had it not been for Gis Though suffering frostbite himself, Gist hauled Washington from the swirling water and built a fire s that the major might thaw out.[14] The remainder of the odyssey, though wearying beyond anythin Washington had ever endured, was uneventful, and he reached Williamsburg early in 1754, seventy seven days after he had departed it in October.[15]

After reading the response of the French commander—who had declared that he was not “obliged obey” Virginia’s demand that France quit the Ohio Country—Governor Dinwiddie knew he would as the assembly to appropriate funds to ready Virginia for an inevitable showdown with the Frenc Washington’s troubling oral report only confirmed the chief executive’s belief that war wa unavoidable. Major Washington brought word that a French army of fifteen hundred men encroache on Virginia’s land in the Ohio Country. Furthermore, Washington told the governor that the Frenc not only had candidly confessed that “it was their absolute Design to take Possession of the Ohio,” b “were not slack in their Inventions” to lure the Seneca into an alliance or neutrality. Dinwiddie aske Washington to quickly submit a written narrative of his mission. In less than twenty-four hours, th twenty-one-year-old Washington prepared a remarkably lucid draft, a well-written report that woul match in quality, if not surpass, what most college students today are capable of producing. Th governor arranged to have the account published in Williamsburg, and in the ensuing months it wa reprinted in numerous American newspapers and in London.[16]

Little time passed before Washington was in a position to gain even greater acclaim. Convinced th Virginia must act quickly if it was to beat the French in establishing a fort at the Forks of the Ohi Dinwiddie summoned one hundred militiamen from two Northern Neck counties and named Maj Washington their commander. He was to march the militiamen to the Ohio. It was a shaky plan a best, and it never got off the ground. Not a single militiaman turned out. Seeing the futility of h course, Dinwiddie summoned the House of Burgesses into a special session, and in February 1754, th assembly voted funding for a volunteer army of three hundred that would be called the Virgin Regiment. The lure to induce men to volunteer was the promise of bounty lands following the war Washington wasted no time contacting influential political figures in Virginia about an appointmen to a higher rank than he currently held. Saying that he did not wish to head the army, he asked for th rank of lieutenant colonel, the number two post in the provincial force. His sole motive in wishing serve, he asserted, was his “sincere love for my country.”[18] Washington got what he wanted. Colon Joshua Fry, a fifty-four-year-old mathematician and cartographer who had studied at Oxford and wa no stranger to the frontier, was named colonel of the little army. Washington was promoted to the ran of lieutenant colonel.

While Fry remained in Virginia to tend to recruiting, Washington marched about half of th projected army deep in the western Pennsylvania wilderness. He had only 186 men under him, but h expected Fry to bring the remaining soldiers and all the army’s artillery, though he did not know whe the reinforcements would arrive. What he did know from intelligence reports was that in April, th French had deployed a one-thousand-man force at the Forks of the Ohio to construct their own fort, a installation they would call Fort Duquesne. Washington also knew that even with the full Virgin army, he would be outnumbered by more than three to one. From a military standpoint, Washington best option would have been to retreat to Virginia and await substantial reinforcements. But the were potentially undesirable personal and political ramifications to a withdrawal. New to authorit

untested, and insecure, Washington was not eager to sound retreat before the enemy had even bee spotted. ~~Besides, throughout the spring he had been entreating Tanacharison to round up his~~ Nativ American allies to accompany the Virginia Regiment. Though he did not know how many Indians, any, would join him, Washington must have feared that backing down at this point would be seen as sign of weakness with long-term implications for Virginia's relations with the western tribe Washington consulted with his officers, most of whom were older, more experienced soldiers, and was agreed to press forward to Red Stone Creek, about thirty-five miles below the Forks, where defensive position could be established and the army could await fresh orders.[19]

As the army painstakingly moved ahead, clearing a road through the hilly and rapidly greenir forest, Washington engaged in diplomacy. Calling himself "Connotacucarious"—"Devourer o Villages"—a name bestowed on him the previous fall by Tanacharison, Washington continued hi efforts to raise Indian allies. He also informed the governors of Pennsylvania and Maryland of th French activities, hoping that it might lead to help from those provinces. Apologizing for h brazenness in approaching them, Washington said he was doing so solely from the "glowing zeal owe my country."[20]

It was at this point, too, that young Colonel Washington first clashed with Governor Dinwiddi Sitting in his tent, with the forest leafing out all about him and his men "slaving dangerously . through woods, rocks, mountains," Washington composed an unctuous letter to the chief executiv not the sort of missive that the older, more self-assured Washington would have drafted. "I reall believe" that were it "in your power, as it is your inclination," all the Virginia Regiment's problem would be solved. As it was, however, the little army was laden with troubles. There was such a deart of noncommissioned officers in each company, Washington began, that it produced "clogs upon th expedition," causing him to "despair of success." He should have stopped there. Instead, unsure himself. Washington permitted his veteran officers to prod him into an ill-advised remonstrance abou their "trifling pay" and how they faced danger for the "shadow of pay." To make matters wors Washington candidly acknowledged that he had gone over the chief executive's head by alread raising the matter with acquaintances on the Governor's Council. Dinwiddie, a flinty Scotsman, w not amused. While he agreed with his young commander about the dearth of sergeants and corporal Dinwiddie straightaway advised Washington that it was "ill timed" for him to have raised the questio of pay. Lieutenant Colonel Washington and his officers should have considered that issue "befor engaging in the Service," a bristling Dinwidde shot back.[21]

Washington soon faced a more immediate problem. Still more than twenty-five miles below Re Stone Creek, Washington learned from Seneca scouts on May 25 that a French force of indetermina number had set out to the south from the Forks of the Ohio. He was told that they wished "to me Miger Georg Wassiontton," but also that they had "deisind [descended] to strike the . . . Englsh." Given the dearth of information, not to mention the incongruities in the written message, Washingto had to be prepared for any eventuality, but especially for an attack. After all, he was leading an arm toward a region that the French had unmistakably claimed as their own.

Dinwiddie's orders to his young commander, drafted weeks earlier, did not make Washington' choice any easier. Washington, the governor had instructed, was to "act on the Difensive," though h was to "kill & destroy" any enemy that sought to uproot the few Virginians who had already settled this hostile land. But as any news that the governor received from his commander would be at least week old, Dinwiddie gave Washington the freedom to act as circumstances required.[23]

Fearing the approach of a numerically superior force, Washington chose to follow Dinwiddie instructions to act defensively. He began to entrench where he was, in a clearing known as the Gre

Meadows. His men had been digging for two days when Christopher Gist, the frontiersman who ha rescued Washington six months earlier, showed up with word that the enemy party that was advancin south from the Ohio numbered no more than fifty soldiers, if that many. Although he did not kno whether Gist's intelligence was accurate, Washington made a crucial decision, and one that violate Dinwiddie's instructions to keep the army within its fortifications. Washington divided his meage force, sending half his soldiers—some ninety men—ahead. It was a risky move. If the French soldie Gist had seen were merely an advance party of a substantially larger force, both halves of the Virgin Regiment would be easy picking for the enemy.

Washington was mad for glory. He was eager to prove his courage both to his officers and t powerful figures in Virginia, and zealous for the combat that would bring the renown for which h hungered. He did not have long to wait for his first taste of battle. Only hours after detaching half h army, Washington learned from a messenger that Tanacharison had spotted signs of the French not fa ahead. Colonel Washington divided those men with him, taking forty of them with him on a rain night march through the dark, knotted forest in search of his prey. He had resolved on a surpris attack.

Several hours of tough hiking on "a Night as dark as Pitch" brought Washington to the Senec camp, where he and Tanacharison parleyed. Washington proposed that they "go hand in hand an strike the French." The sachem agreed, and the two forces set off on a brief trek through the heav sodden woods. Just as day was breaking on May 28, the campfires of their prey were spotted. Creepin closer, Washington discovered that the French, who had posted no sentries, were making breakfast. H ordered his men to encircle the Frenchmen, while the Senecas formed an outer ring. The Indians we to deal with any enemy soldier who succeeded in escaping through the English line.

Washington waited for what must have seemed an eternity for the last man to get in place. When a was ready, he screamed the order to open fire. The French never had a chance. Taken by surprise, the were victims of a massacre. Some were killed instantly in the initial volley. Others were wounde including the French commander, sieur de Jumonville. When the firing stopped, up to twelve Frenc soldiers lay dead at his feet—Washington variously reported that ten, eleven, and twelve Frenchme had perished—and several wounded Frenchmen were scattered about. But the killing did not end wi the cessation of the gunfire. Immobilized either by bloodlust or the awful sights that he was beholdin for the first time, Washington made no attempt to stop the carnage. Tanacharison cracked ope Jumonville's skull, extracting his warm brain, which he squeezed through his fingers like a spong Frenzied by their sachem's act, other Indian warriors went on a rampage. Ignoring the enem prisoners who had come through the ambush unscathed, the Indians scalped many of the wounde even decapitating one and impaling his head on a pike. When there were no more wounded slaughter and the massacre at last ended, Washington read the papers that he found on Jumonville body. His counterpart had not been leading a war party. He had been bringing a message to th English. Jumonville had been sent on a mission precisely like that which had taken Washington t Fort Le Boeuf six months earlier.[24]

Washington had tasted combat and found it a heady experience. In one of the very few memorab lines that he wrote during his long life, Washington, in a letter written a few days later, declared tha he had "heard Bullets whistle and believe me there was something charming in the sound."[25] Howeve in the immediate aftermath of his ambush, Washington was beset with anxiety, and with good reaso Having ordered a hostile act against a peaceful party, he had considerably stretched Dinwiddie elastic orders. Nor was he even the commander of the Virginia Regiment. Apprehensive, youn Washington turned to damage control. He wrote the governor that the French he had killed were real "Spyes of the worst sort" sent to lay the spadework for an enemy attack and cautioning Dinwiddie n

to be duped by whatever “smooth Story’s” were spun by the score or more prisoners he was sendin
back to Williamsburg. The captives “ought to be hang’d,” he told the chief executive.[26]

Something else troubled Washington. As some in the French party had escaped and would notif their commander at Fort Duquesne of what had transpired, Washington knew that he was a marke man. A large French force would come after his little Virginia army. Washington did not panic however. He recalled the men he had unwisely sent ahead a few days earlier and, at Great Meadow continued the construction of a defensive installation. Revealingly, he christened it Fort Necessit Knowing that he would never reach the Ohio as he had been ordered to do, Washington, at lea subliminally, had begun to prepare his defense of his campaign. The name implied it was necessit not a lack of valor, that had compelled him to stop here, almost sixty miles short of the Forks of th Ohio.

As Washington’s small, circular stockade took shape, his Indian allies departed. They had n stomach for fighting from inside a fort. Besides, the disheartened Indians had concluded that the gra faced, nervous Virginians were certain to be outnumbered and encased in a pathetic enclosure th inevitably would be a death trap. They saw what Washington could not, or would not, see. Th Virginians were doomed.

Ultimately, some four hundred English crowded into and around Fort Necessity. The remainder o the Virginia Regiment arrived in June, bringing word that Colonel Fry had died in a fall from his hor three days after Washington’s attack on Jumonville’s party. Washington was unmistakably i command of the Virginia army, though in the next few days an independent company composed o men from South Carolina, a provincial unit attached to the British army, also marched in. I commander, Captain James Mackay, who had been soldiering since Washington was five years ol held a commission from the Crown, which under British law meant that he outranked any coloni officer who, like Washington, did not hold such a commission.[27]

Washington, who had worked hard to achieve his position of command, had no intention o submitting to Captain Mackay. Anxious and threatened, he railed in a message to Dinwiddie about th interloper’s wish to take command of his men, and he claimed that Captain Mackay’s presence wa impeding the operations of the Virginia Regiment. Mackay solved the problem by establishing h men in a separate camp outside Fort Necessity and by acting—as Washington acknowledged—as “ very good sort of a Gentleman.”[28]

One reason Mackay handled matters in this fashion may have been that he recognized the novic Virginia commander was constructing a fatal snare. Mackay may simply have wanted room t maneuver. Fort Necessity was surrounded by hills and woods, making it easy for an enemy to surroun the facility and pick off the defenders as if this were a turkey shoot. That, it turned out, was precise what the French did. A French and Indian force of some nine hundred men—the majority wer Canadians—under Louis Coulon de Villiers, Jumonville’s brother, arrived on July 3 primed for battl En route to the Great Meadows, they had discovered the bodies of Jumonville and his men, scalpe and evidently left unburied by Washington. Many of the French were avid for revenge.

The battle that ensued was brief and one-sided. From high ground and thick forests on every side the fort, the French directed a deadly triangulated fire at Washington’s beleaguered men. Finding th Virginians’ horses and cattle an inviting target, the French and Indians killed them at once. Soldiers i the Virginia Regiment were gunned down, too. By the time a late afternoon downpour largely ende the fray, one quarter of Washington’s men were casualties. Many were grievously wounded and thirt were dead or dying. Only Villiers’s fear of enemy reinforcements kept him from killing every la Englishman. Instead, he offered to permit Washington to surrender, a gesture that one of the Virgini officers later said was “no disagreeable News to us.” The men were “Wet; Muddy half thigh up,” an

as one acknowledged, aware that there was no escape from “this pickle.” With his life hanging in th balance, Washington not only surrendered on July 4, but signed an incriminating document in whic he confessed that Jumonville had been murdered. In return, the British were not taken captive—ofte a death sentence in eighteenth-century wars—but were permitted to march back to Virginia.[29]

In the wake of this disaster, Washington faced a monumental job of rehabilitation. His report penned in a triumphant tone, emphasized that the French had suffered losses exceeding three hundre —they had actually sustained nineteen casualties—and that the defeated Virginians had marche home from the beleaguered fort with “our Drums beating and our Colours flying.” He stressed that h army’s defeat was due to insufficient supplies and a callow soldiery. He never, then or later, admitte any errors on his part.

Most of Washington’s attention was focused on his damaging admission of Jumonville’s murde Not for the last time in his career, Washington pinned the blame on someone else. This time, h translator, Jacob Van Braam, was made the scapegoat. Though Van Braam was fluent in French, ha resided in Virginia for two years, and had been welcomed by the army as its translator following h effective service in that capacity during the mission to Fort Le Boeuf, Washington claimed that h “was a Dutchman, little acquainted with the English tongue.” In the event that such a shak explanation was unconvincing, Washington additionally questioned Van Braam’s integrity, implyin that he had deliberately skewed the translation, “whatever his motives” may have been. Van Braa was not around to provide his side of the story. One of two hostages demanded by the French, h languished in Canada for the next six years, after which he soldiered with the British army befo settling in Wales. Van Braam never returned to Virginia and never gave an account of the episode.[30]

Washington was not treated as a pariah when he returned to Virginia. Many understood that he ha been sent on a fool’s errand, and some probably thought it best not to incur the malice of h influential patrons. Washington was also helped by the fact that none of the officers in the Virgin Regiment criticized his conduct. One, Major Adam Stephen, who had been promoted by Washingto and whose brother worked for the Fairfax family, published an account in Virginia and Marylan newspapers that defended Washington for having remained in Pennsylvania to make a stand against superior adversary.[31] Nevertheless, gossip about Washington’s failure swirled, and some criticism wa aired publicly. From as far away as New York, critics who thought Washington “too ambitious o acquiring all the honor” condemned him for having acted rashly. Some in London dismissed h failure as merely what was to be expected from Americans who “have no knowledge or experience” a soldiers. In Virginia, a few who dared to speak out speculated that he had mishandled the Indians, view given sustenance by Tanacharison’s postmortem remark that Washington was “good nature but unsuited for Indian diplomacy, as he treated the Native Americans “as his slaves.”[32]

Publicly, Dinwiddie and the assembly expressed their gratitude for Washington’s service.[33] But private, the governor recognized that young Washington had been an improper choice for th demanding responsibilities he had been given. Dinwiddie appeared to have come to that judgme before Fort Necessity, and following the debacle at Great Meadows, he told Washington that some o the Virginia Regiment’s problems stemmed from “the want of proper Command.” Dinwiddie als informed London, somewhat disingenuously, that his lieutenant colonel had violated his orders t avoid a showdown until anticipated reinforcements from New York and North Carolina arrive Washington’s orders, in fact, had been to delay his attempt to drive the French from the Forks of th Ohio until he was reinforced.[34]

In August, when the long awaited reinforcements at last reached Virginia, Dinwiddie ordered th intercolonial force—it was composed of Virginians, Carolinians, and New Yorkers—to “march ove

the Allegany Mountains,” but he appointed Colonel James Innes, a Scottish-born North Carolin
~~planter and veteran militia officer, to command the army. That force accomplished even les~~s tha
Washington’s army. It never reached Pennsylvania. The following month, Governor Horatio Sharpe o
Maryland received a commission from London that made him commander in chief of all Britis
forces tasked with securing the Forks of the Ohio, and he too set out to put together an intercoloni
army, though he was stymied, in part, by the fast-approaching winter.[35]

Sharpe’s appointment was bad news for Washington. Having heard on the grapevine that Sharpe ha
criticized his performance in leading the Virginia Regiment, Washington had earlier fired off a lette
defending his actions. With that air of haughtiness that so often was characteristic of royal official
Sharpe responded by noting with disapproval Washington’s “freedom” in approaching him. A
anguished, and supine, Washington was compelled to mend fences, and he doubtless learned
valuable political lesson about appearing to act impertinently.[36]

When Sharpe, like Innes before him, went nowhere, an exasperated Dinwiddie wrote London f
help. While awaiting an answer, he broke up the Virginia Regiment into several companies, with n
officer holding a rank above captain. His step, approved by Sharpe, smacks—at least in part—
having been taken as a means of ridding Virginia’s army of Lieutenant Colonel Washington. If so,
succeeded. Rather than submit to a humiliating demotion, Washington resigned. His short-lived sta
at military glory was in tatters.[37]

Washington was bitter. “My commission [was] taken from me,” he raged. He also complained, i
private, that Dinwiddie had lied to him, claiming that “an order from home” had left him with n
choice but to strip Washington of his authority.[38] Washington’s assessment was at least half-correc
He wanted another chance, although with his stock having sunk in Dinwiddie’s eyes, Washington ha
little reason for optimism. Even so, he tenaciously courted friends in the assembly, reminding the
that he had faced “extreme danger” as a soldier because he had seen it as his “indispensable duty”
Virginia to do so. Adding that his decision to leave the army was due to “the call of Honour,” not to a
aversion to soldiering, Washington underscored that his “inclinations are strongly bent to arms.”
Rumors were circulating that another stab would be made at raising an intercolonial army, even th
the British might dispatch a force to the colonies, in which case the redcoats would raise provinci
forces, the very sort of colonial army in which Lawrence had served. While he waited out the lon
bleak winter, eager to soldier again, Washington leased from Lawrence’s widow Mount Vernon,
2,298-acre tract, and eighteen slaves. He also inherited nine of his deceased brother’s slaves.[40] On
twenty-two, Washington had attained the status of a planter and the prospect of considerable wealt
but he had gained neither the renown nor the deference that Lawrence had enjoyed. Young Washingto
knew, too, that neither would be his until he won glory as a soldier.

Washington’s break came when the British government, without declaring war on France, dispatche
two infantry regiments and a train of artillery to America under General Edward Braddock, a sixty
year-old veteran soldier. Braddock’s orders were to drive the French from Fort Duquesne. He was t
be assisted by a force of seven hundred provincial soldiers that Governor Sharpe was ordered to rais
Eager to get back into uniform and to obtain a royal commission, Washington ignored Sharpe an
through intermediaries, offered his services to Braddock. The British general, he learned, w
empowered to offer a commission with the rank only of captain, a demotion that Washington onc
again was unwilling to accept. He did not give up. Washington explained to Braddock that he wishe
“for nothing more earnestly than to attain a small degree of knowledge in the Military Art.” A
Braddock realized this young Virginian who had made two journeys to the Pennsylvania frontier cou

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