For thirty years and more I have been inhabiting the domestic environment created by George Washington, studying the man and his life, while carrying on the activities of my custodial position. During much of this time I have been troubled by the difference between the man as he was and the images of him which are dominant in the minds of present generations. In my small way I have tried to set the record straight, denying the slanders, disputing the legendary myths, discounting the trivialities which seem to fascinate the folk mind. It has been an unattractive role; but the goal is challenging.

An optimist, I believe that the history of this nation is the Western World's greatest asset in the struggle for men's minds. I hold with Lord Brougham, also, that "the test of the progress of mankind will be their appreciation of the character of George Washington."

Hence, these slanders, myths and obscuring trivialities become important. As unhistorical contradictions they puzzled me until I read an editorial in a local paper about one of England's national heroes whose reputation had been attacked by a biographer. The

Mr. Wall, University of Pennsylvania '26, has been associated with the management of Mount Vernon, Virginia, for thirty-seven years and during the past twenty-nine years has served as resident director of the property. It is natural that, because of his position, he has become an authority on many facets of Washington's life. His essay originally was presented as an address before The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on February 24, 1964. It appears to have acquired additional significance and historical value in the months that have passed since that date.—Editor
editorial was devoted to the emotional source of resultant popular indignation, not to the justice or injustice of the attack. "Heroes are mirrors in which a people see themselves reflected," the editor wrote. How true! Heroes personify the national ideal; we, the Nation, and we, the individual citizens, tend to see what we want to see when we contemplate our illustrious dead. To say that these images are often distorted would be a mild understatement. This certainly is true of the public image of George Washington. Not all of these distortions are important in terms of the heritage value of the man, but to the historian all are troublesome.

A nation prefers that its heroes be men of great physical stature and prowess. Washington fulfilled these qualifications rather adequately, but he was not six feet six. He did not throw a silver dollar across the Rappahannock or the Potomac. I am no longer troubled by exaggerations of his physical proportions or his exploits; they are not harmful or significant. It is relevant that great physical stamina has been an essential characteristic of most great men and it is fortunate for us that George Washington was so endowed.

Specifically I am not troubled by the cherry tree story. Myth though it probably is, it takes the form of a parable or a pious fable, reflecting the image which Parson Weems, itinerant clergyman and bookseller, saw and wished to impress upon the youth of America. It reflects a basic fact about George Washington and there is no harm in it.

The numerous misstatements about Washington’s religion also can be dismissed as unimportant. Our personal belief is important to each of us, and we would like to think that George Washington shared our faith. Many have looked into wistfully fogged mirrors and determined to their own satisfaction that George Washington was a fellow atheist, Baptist, or Catholic. These individual whimsies easily can be recognized and discounted. The essential truth of George Washington’s belief in a Divine Providence and his tolerance of all creeds is well established. His entire career manifests a deep and abiding faith. Religion was a guiding influence in his life, public and private. This influence is nowhere more happily displayed than in the closing sentence of his valedictory letter to the governors of the states, written as he prepared to relinquish command of the Continental Army: “I now make it my earnest prayer, that God would have you, and the State over which you preside, in his holy protection, that he would incline the hearts of the Citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to Government, to entertain a brotherly affection
and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for their brethren who have served in the Field, and finally, that he would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do Justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation."

Our heritage is impaired by the misconception of George Washington as a wealthy man. It arises, I think, from the fact that we pay homage to material success. By a process of oversimplification, George Washington the Revolutionist becomes a conservative, the patron saint of financiers and captains of industry. This clouded image is difficult to deal with because it contains a half-truth. George Washington was a man of large estate, but to equate a nonproductive estate with wealth is to obscure the fact that the owner neglected his private affairs to serve his country and in consequence was financially embarrassed throughout the last twenty-five years of his life.

There are certain libelous slanders which cannot be so lightly dismissed. They are unfounded and they have been disproved, but they persist. Dr. Freeman, author of the definitive biography of Washington, writes: "Scarcely a doubt can remain that he was in love with the wife of a neighbor and friend. Although he told her so after he had become engaged to another woman, the discretion of Sally Fairfax and her character and his own saved them from any sort of scandal." It should be added that the married life of George and Martha Washington presents a record of unswerving mutual devotion over a period of forty years. Here again, in the persistence of these doubts and slanders, the mirror concept applies. The philanderer, actual or frustrated, salves his conscience by attributing his own lack of inhibition to George Washington. He looks into the historical mirror and sees an image which satisfies his own willful preconception. Such people and their beliefs are important only as they create skepticism in healthy minds. They are easily diagnosed and best ignored. When, as so often happens, a new acquaintance identifies me with Mount Vernon and flashes his image of George Washington by saying, "The old boy got around," I can classify him offhand. He is an unreconciled captive of the state of monogamy.

When we look into the mirror of history with a clear and healthy eye, what manner of man do we discover George Washington to have been? He was not an easy man to know, as Dr. Freeman discovered.
He was an Englishman, with the reticence and gift for understatement which characterize that breed of men. A comparative study of eminent Anglo-Saxon leaders could be highly interesting. Washington, I think, had something distinctively significant in common with Marlborough, Cromwell, Wellington and Churchill. He drew a sharp distinction between his public and his private life. In the former he assumed the dignity which he thought proper to the office he held. Hence, in his most conspicuous and best recorded roles he has left an impression of formidableness, an impression of a man without a sense of humor. In his private life he commanded what the word denotes, privacy, to a much greater degree than is possible today. His personal letters reveal more of the writer’s true self, his tastes and his philosophy, than do his official papers, but they partake of the general literary style of the period — formal, oftentimes to the point of seeming stilted by present-day standards. Unfortunately, his portraits also follow the prevailing mode; they portray the official personage, stern of visage.

One of his few intimates, Henry Lee — Lighthorse Harry Lee of Revolutionary fame — characterized Washington as “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” This, you will note, is not a full sentence. Let me quote it in full: “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life.” The three “firsts” were so apt and they so captured the public imagination as to eclipse what Lee here intended to emphasize and what he was so well qualified to affirm — “he was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life.” This private George Washington is the man we should know if we are to derive personal inspiration from his life.

Washington’s career evolved outward and upward from the local setting in which he was second to none. Although not a father, he was a devoted stepfather to Mrs. Washington’s two children and later to her grandchildren; his position with his numerous nephews and nieces was patriarchal. In his parish he was a vestryman. He represented his community in the House of Burgesses, and there, by 1774, without eloquence or effort to aggrandize himself, he stood among the highest in the esteem of his colleagues. He would have been characterized by his friends as “disinterested,” a man of integrity, devoid of ambition for position, power, or fame. He had no desire other than to be numbered among those who “live genteelly and hospitably on
clear estates,” as he expressed it in a letter to his neighbor, George Mason.

If we could probe deeper into the mind and motivations of this colonial Englishman, what would we find? An occasional note of belligerence appears in his writings as he comments on the encroachments of King and Parliament. He was jealous of his liberties. There is no inkling of the Rubicon which he was so soon to cross, no indication that he would think himself equal to the crossing; no evidence of that tenacity of purpose without which all his other virtues would have been futile. Yet, as we read his correspondence on the eve of the Revolution, we encounter a prophetic passage in a letter to a dying neighbor who had asked him to be his executor and the guardian of his only son. In reply, Washington wrote of time-consuming services to others which denied him any leisure. He declined the executorship, but offered to become the boy’s guardian. In this letter there is a single sentence more significant in the context of events, more revealing of the writer’s deepest motivations, than can be found elsewhere in all the volumes of his writings. The sentence reads, . . . . “I never deny, or even hesitate in granting any request that is made to me (especially by persons I esteem, and in matters of moment) without feeling inexpressible uneasiness.” Five months later, to avoid a feeling of “inexpressible uneasiness” he did not deny the request of the Continental Congress that he assume command of its army. On his own testimony and that of his close friends, it can be affirmed that he did not want this command, that he felt himself unequal to it. He had never held military command above the regimental level. At that level his reputation was established. He could have returned to Virginia, assured of top command there, to lead men he knew over familiar terrain, with a fair prospect of enhancing his reputation. The request of Congress, he knew, was prompted by political considerations, not by any opinion of his military abilities higher than his own modest estimate. His decision is foretold in his letter to the dying neighbor five months earlier. This time it was “a matter of moment.” He may have hesitated, but he did not deny. Though “domestic ease,” as he termed it, must be put aside, and reputation, estate and life itself be hazarded, he turned northward to lead a motley militia against the most potent military power in the world, his mother country.

Surely this compulsion to serve his neighbor and his fellowman in a larger theatre was not a transitory manifestation of youthful idealism. Many years later, during the first term of his Presidency, Washington survived two severe illnesses. In a letter to Lafayette he
noted that his physician had advised more exercise and less application to business, but, he wrote, "I cannot avoid persuading myself that it is essential to accomplish whatever I have undertaken (though reluctantly) to the best of my abilities."

Is there not inspiration for us in George Washington's dedicated career? We have no expectation of facing a similar personal dilemma in such an exalted historical setting. Our opportunities and our obligations are more likely to confront us within our own more local communities. But I submit most earnestly that the health and the survival of an open society such as ours depends on our willingness to emulate the man whose inner compulsion would allow him to deny neither his neighbor nor his fellowmen at large.

And while we may premise that our opportunities are likely to be more local and less demanding, George Washington's career suggests that this need not be so. Dr. Freeman emphasizes that his life, from youth to old age, is a remarkable example of developing abilities which were equal to the ever greater challenges he faced. It is permissible to reflect that in less trying times Washington might have lived out his life in obscurity, his potentialities unrealized, but, happily for us, the man and the crisis coincided.

While I do not suggest that we are all potential George Washingtons, I do insist that the times are no less perilous than they were in 1775 and that our individual potentials surpass our performances. We hesitate and deny when the times call for sacrifice of present ease. The institutions created by our founding fathers were never more gravely threatened, from the left and the right, from within and without. But the ideals which inspired these men have lost nothing of their dynamic content. They were never more relevant; they are our finest heritage. The free world looks anxiously to us for leadership.

"Let us raise a standard to which the wise and the honest can repair," George Washington said. Will we fatalistically accept a state of "inexpressible uneasiness" or will we rise to the challenge? Our answers might be decisive — for ourselves, our society, and our posterity. If the mirror of history can inspire us and guide us to correct decisions and timely actions, we may look with confidence to a faithful image of the man who "was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life."

By coincidence the title of the above article is similar to W. E. Woodward's *G Washington: The Image and the Man* (1926).