BOOK REVIEWS


The clear perception of how to wield power is the key to understanding George Washington, according to this insightful lecture before the Society of the Cincinnati by Edmund S. Morgan. This knowledge also explains why the "Great Man of the Revolution" also appeared to both contemporaries and posterity as aloof. The distance that he kept between himself and contemporaries was due to his sense of command.

To support his interpretation of this central feature of Washington's personality, Morgan has appended representative examples of Washington's correspondence which buttress the argument of the lecture. The speech itself was necessarily brief and selectively sketched how Washington utilized his gift for wielding power. The letters show how the Founding Father skillfully wielded the pen to spur Congress, colleagues, and friends to actions that he considered to be in the national interest.

Washington's concern for the need for firmness by the colonists in resisting British taxation led him to split with his old friend Bryan Fairfax. He cogently stated the case for resistance to the Coercive Acts in a letter to Fairfax in July 1774. He wrote, "I think the Parliament of Great Britain hath no more right to put their hands into my pocket, without my consent, than I have to put my hands into yours for money; and this being already urged to them in a firm, but decent manner, by all the colonists, what reason is there to expect anything from their justice?"

Washington's understanding of how to exert power in wartime over a volunteer army is demonstrated by a letter of September 24, 1776, to John Hancock when he wrote: "To bring Men to a proper degree of Subordination, is not the work of a day, a Month or even a year; and unhappily for us, and the cause we are Engaged in, the little discipline I have been labouring to establish in the Army under my immediate Command, is in a manner done away by having such a mixture of Troops as have been called together within these months."
He went on to lament the short term of service of the men in the army, something he would repeatedly deplore.

Washington had an appreciation of the dynamics of international politics as well as military strategy. In a letter to Henry Laurens on November 14, 1778, he warned of the potential postwar dangers of the conquest of Canada with French aid. He cautioned, "France acknowledged for some time past the most powerful monarchy in Europe by land, able now to dispute the empire of the sea with Great Britain, and if joined with Spain . . . possessed of New Orleans, on our Right, Canada, on our left and seconded by the numerous tribes of Indians on our Rear . . . would . . . have it in their power to give law to these states."

His perception of the dynamics of international relations during the perils of the wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period led him to father the policy of noninvolvement with other nations. He wrote to William Heath on May 20, 1797, a succinct statement of the policies set forth in the famous Farewell Address: "No policy, in my opinion, can be more clearly demonstrated, than that we should do justice to all but have no political connexions with any of the European powers, beyond those which result from and serve to regulate our Commerce with them. Our own experience (if it has not already had this effect) will soon convince us that disinterested favours, or friendship from any nation whatever, is too novel to be calculated on; and there will always be found a wide difference between the words and actions of any of them."

The foregoing excerpts support Morgan's conclusion that Washington's great contribution to American history was his understanding of the nature and uses of power. He was not as intellectually brilliant as Jefferson or a fiscal genius like Hamilton, but "in his understanding of power he left them all behind, as he did the British generals who opposed him and the French who assisted him." His use of that understanding of the nature of power enabled him, both as a general and a president, to put America on the road to becoming a great power in the future.

Department of History
West Liberty State College
West Liberty, West Virginia

Kenneth R. Nodyne