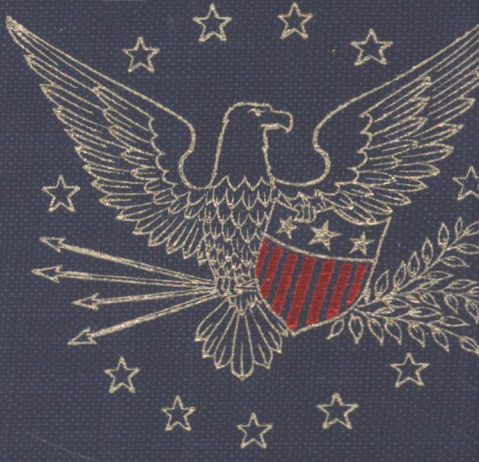
George Washington

Anguish and Farewell

1793–1799

★★★★

James Thomas Flexner



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GEORGE WASHINGTON

Anguish and Farewell

(*1793–1799*)

by JAMES THOMAS FLEXNER

with photographs

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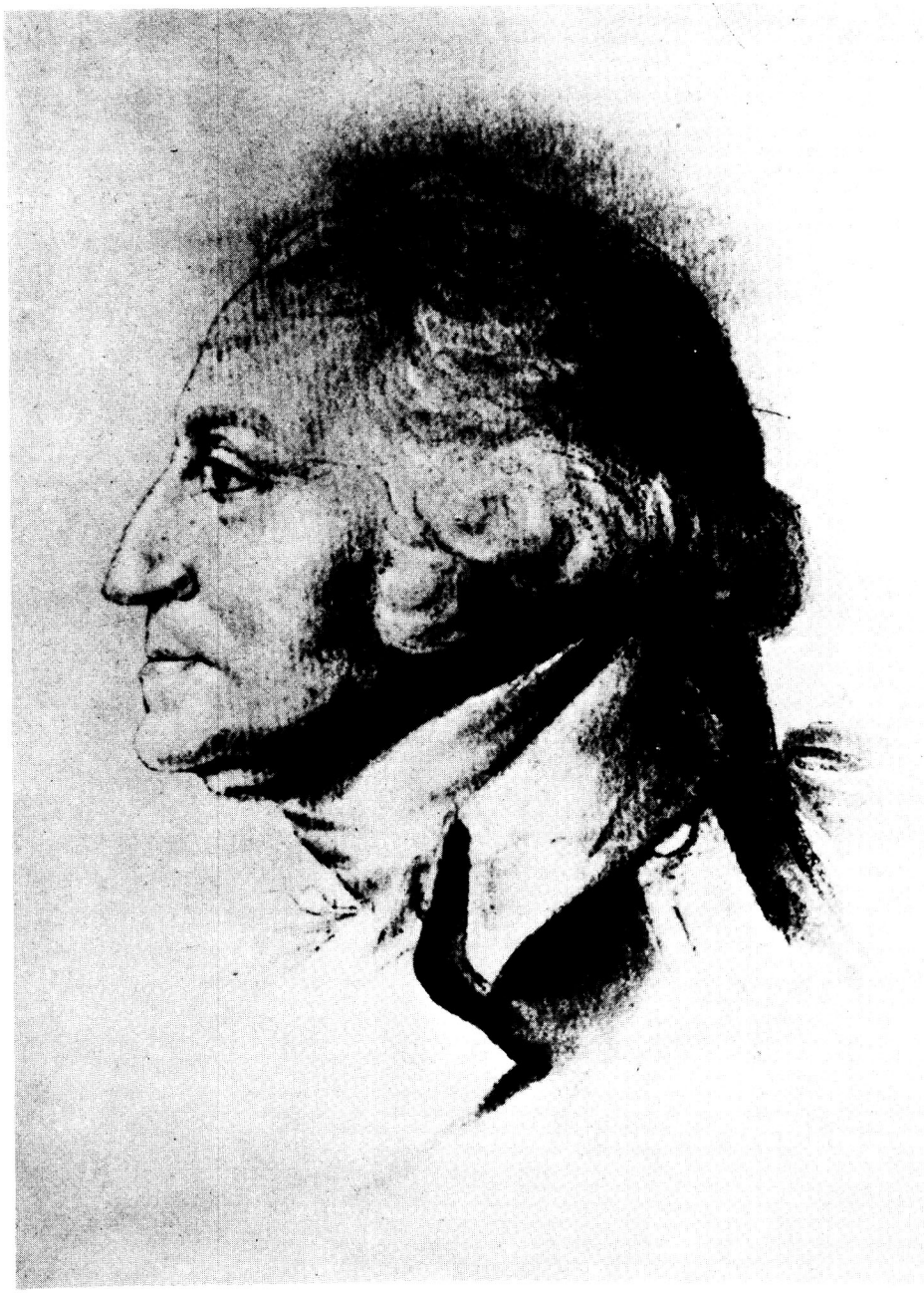
GEORGE WASHINGTON

Anguish and Farewell

(1793–1799)



George Washington, by Charles Balthazar Julien Fevret de Saint-Mémin. This was the last portrait of Washington, drawn when the ex-President was in Philadelphia during November 1789, organizing plans for an army to defend the United States from the French. Original lost. Reproduction courtesy of the New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

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GEORGE WASHINGTON

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(*1793–1799*)

Introduction

TO an extent which under examination becomes shocking, the passage of years has buried in historical memory the living Washington. The charm and splendor of his character, the greatness of his contribution to the United States and to human freedom everywhere, have been distorted into various caricatures, which are now regarded as the true man.

Even as it would be ridiculous to attribute a volcanic eruption to a molehill, so it is ridiculous to define Washington as a man incapable of achieving what Washington achieved. The cold hero who never smiled or loved or told a lie; the comic figure characterized by wooden false teeth; the hypocritical crook who refused any salary as Commander in Chief and then forged his expense account; the autocrat chuckling as he undermined the republican aspirations of American people; the self-congratulatory stuffed shirt — none of these could possibly have done what the record reveals Washington did. Not one of these would as a stripling have been entrusted with a dangerous and vital diplomatic mission through a frozen wilderness; not one could have kept, year after year, an unfed and naked army in the field to win a seemingly hopeless war against the might of Great Britain; not one would have repelled the possibility opened to him of being dictator or king; not one could have led a far-flung nation into a stronger constitutional union and then steered to solidity the first major republican government in the modern world; not one could have directed a mercantile nation torn by ideological disputes on the path of peace through the wars of the French Revolution; not one would have, in a position of perhaps unassailable power, always put first what he considered the welfare of the people.

Washington had to have the fierceness necessary to a successful soldier, the self-will necessary for a leader of men, the self-interest essential to the amassing of a large estate. He exploded sometimes into actions of which his best judgment disapproved. He could be very overbearing to his subordinates, even to fellow statesmen of such stature as Jefferson and Hamilton. In his private life as in his public, he was not always understanding, not always kind. Yet Washington wished to be wise and good.

Which of the triumphant generals, which of the great rulers in all time have so willingly relinquished power, have inspired so little fear among their contemporaries, so much love? Only after Washington's death could Jefferson have been correctly styled "The Man of the People." While Washington lived, even in his last unhappy years, the majority of the people followed, often in opposition to the expressed convictions of the Jeffersonians, wherever Washington led.

Washington's character comprised that pull of opposites which give color and depth. His heart was warm; his emotions fierce; his gentleness both deep and the result of control; his prudence due as much to self-education as to temperament; his intentions (although he sometimes slipped) altruistic; his force tremendous; his feelings oversensitive; his charm usually overwhelming. His motions were graceful although he had the physical strength of a giant. Conscious of an inadequate education, he was always slow of speech, seeking the right word. If he became sometimes self-righteous, he was always self-demanding. Although he was an aristocrat by temperament and achievement, his kindness knew no class or economic bounds.

This fourth volume in my life of Washington tells how the first President, although apprehensive because of the symptoms he felt within him of approaching old age, was forced to remain in power as his grasp did in fact weaken. By accepting a second term, he had laid open his fame, the reward for which he had so long labored, to attackers who gleefully charged that the weaknesses he now revealed had been characteristic of his whole career. He became deeply hurt, haunted by feelings of failure. Yet his last major services to the nation were as vitally important as his previous services had been.

Had Washington refused a second term or been unable to serve, the United States would quite probably have slipped into the wars touched off by the French Revolution, which wrecked much of Europe. Such involvement abroad might well have incited at home civil dissension that could

have broken the union into two or more mutually hostile nations. The area now covered by the United States might well have become, in its political divisions, another Europe. Not even historians now most strongly interventionist believe that the newly formed republic would have been better off had it been caught up, while still weak and coalescing, in foreign politics.

The helm Washington held was at the opening of his second term tugged at from opposite sides by leaders who, while agreeing that peace was important to the United States, were greatly frightened by what they believed would be the effect in American farms and cities of victory achieved by one European camp or the other. The pro-French Jeffersonians saw British success lifting an aristocracy over the American people, while the pro-British Hamiltonians envisioned, should the French win, revolutionaries dominating the United States and perhaps setting up guillotines in American squares. Washington feared no tidal wave from Europe. He feared only the conflict between factions at home.

Avoiding, as best he could, the pro-French "brinkmanship" urged by Secretary of State Jefferson, the pro-British "brinkmanship" urged by Secretary of the Treasury Hamilton, Washington for a time persuaded the two rivals to work together, however acrimoniously, under his leadership. However, Jefferson became more and more unhappy and finally, disregarding Washington's importunings, resigned from the Cabinet.

Jefferson's resignation was for Washington the most destructive event in his entire career. The aging President was deprived of an invaluable counterweight in his administration to the able, grasping, and much younger Hamilton. And, no longer held down by executive responsibility, Jefferson went completely into the opposition, fanning the flames of what Washington considered irresponsible faction. Washington's acts and reputation became the target for clouds of envenomed darts. Although the mass of the people still loved and trusted him, he ceased, to his deep dismay, to be what he felt it was his duty to be: the accepted leader of all the people, everyman's President.

It had been assumed (even by Jefferson, who did not then object) that Washington would, like the kings who ruled around him, stay in power until death required a new President. Washington himself believed that the American experiment needed, to complete its demonstration that humanity could rule itself, the orderly relinquishment of power by one elected representative to his elected successor. This would be a prodigy

in a world of kings. Although he might well have sought vindication from attacks in the overwhelming suffrage he would undoubtedly have received had he run again, Washington made his last major gift to the nation and the world by returning of his own free will to the private life for which part of his nature had always hankered. The republican system was thus sent rolling down its own road.

Washington longed for tranquillity, but carried bitterness back with him to his fields. He believed increasingly that he had been maligned from the worst motives, and betrayed by Jefferson. He finally became the partisan anti-French Federalist that he was to be wrongly accused of having previously been. Although periods of senility permitted him to engage in outrageous and unreasonable acts, he recognized, when urged by Federalists to run again for the Presidency in 1799, that for a man in his condition to agree would be "imbecility."

According to modern ideas, Washington was not at sixty-seven a truly old man. Yet his thread had been spun and he knew it. As soon as his final illness came upon him, he was sure — and not altogether regretfully — that this was the end.

Introductions being commonly written last, these paragraphs end twelve years' labor. Since this is the only extensive biography of Washington in more than a century which the author has lived to finish, my reaction should probably be relief that I am here alive to write these words and ready for future projects. Yet the completion of such a task as this brings sadness as well as jubilation.

In seeking imaginary intimacy with Washington, I have tried from the very beginning of my task to view the world over my protagonist's shoulder, attentive from day to day to his words as they were recorded in thousands of documents. I did, of course, step back sometimes to view Washington in the perspective offered by a distance of years. I would have been stupid to throw away the possibilities of clarifying the behavior of Washington's associates through documents not available to him but available to me. Although determined to prevent anything that has happened or been written during the intervening two centuries from dropping veils between me and my protagonist, I have profited from the researches and insights of my biographical and historical predecessors. But always my object has been to return to my stance at my protagonist's side, closer to the man who actually lived.