

### Humanizing America's Father

United States history thrives on its heroes. Lewis and Clark helped America reach the Pacific. Babe Ruth hit home runs for sick kids. Charles Lindbergh flew, Jessie Owens ran, Washington crossed the Delaware and men like Martin Luther King, Jr. brought hope and justice to an entire population of our society. These are but a few of the hundreds of famous and influential individuals who put their mark on this country's short history. However, what happens when the flawless image of our heroes is tarnished by their own humanity? Dr. *Reverend* Martin Luther King, Jr. may have done more for African Americans and minority groups than any other single man since Abe Lincoln, but he was an adulterer. Babe Ruth is the darling of the American past time, but he was a drunk. And George Washington is the father of our nation and the hero of the Revolution, but he owned slaves. Should these flaws overshadow the impact these men had on our society? Should they be swept aside in order to preserve our reverence for our heroes? Or, should their flaws become part of a more complete biography to show future generations that ordinary individuals were able to accomplish extraordinary feats, in spite of their own misgivings? In his work, An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America, Henry Wiencek attempts to do just this. Throughout his narrative Wiencek neither tries to forgive nor condemn Washington for owning slaves. After all, it was completely natural and expected that a man of Washington's stature, during the Revolutionary period, would own slaves. It was his changing ideas concerning slavery that were unnatural and unexpected for the time, and it is this aspect of Washington's life that Wiencek focuses on.

In order to better explain the reasons for Washington's ownership of a slaves, Wiencek begins by explaining pre-Revolutionary Virginian society. "In Washington's Virginia, family

determined one's place and one's identity, even in relation to the Creator." (pp. 18-19) While George's last name graces today's schools, monuments and our country's capitol, it was not necessarily well known at the time. He owned some land, a few slaves and had a relatively well-known military career to his credit. Ultimately, it was Washington's marriage to Martha, a wealthy widow with more land and slaves, which helped elevate him in Virginia's society. Before the Revolution broke out, George was quite happy trying to become an accomplished farmer at Mount Vernon. It was a basic fundamental rule that all large Virginian farms depended on the use of slave labor. Washington inherited ten slaves from his father, who had inherited a number from his father, (p. 46) and garnered even more through his marriage to Martha. At this stage in his life he never gave a second thought as to whether or not the system was right or wrong; it was simply how the system worked. In addition to the obvious advantages of free labor, the slaves actually counted as property towards one's individual wealth.

More than the land, it was the number of slaves they owned that made the Washingtons wealthy. Slaves were valuable pieces of property that carried a fluctuating price tag. All depending on health and attitude slave children could be worth 60-75 pounds, skilled slaves (such as carpenters) could be worth several hundred pounds, and female slaves who could breed might fetch even more. By the time of his death Washington owned over one hundred slaves spread out over several farms. Even as he begins to wrestle with the moral injustice of slavery, and considers the idea of emancipating his slaves (though this may have been more out of guilt than love of fellow man), he is unable to look past the immense loss of money that it will cause. (p. 230) To put this in perspective, when Washington's nephew died in 1811 "[t]he combined value of his personal property and livestock came to a little over \$5,000..." but "[t]he value of all the slaves came to about \$21,800." (p. 25) As the predominant view of slaves was that of property to be bought, used and sold, it is easy to understand why he would be so reluctant to simply give them away to freedom. There must have been some defining moment or event that

caused Washington to change his view on slavery and grant them their freedom in his will, thus denying his future generations of a great deal of wealth.

Wiencek argues, in a fascinating and disturbing chapter entitled “A Scheme in Williamsburg”, that such a defining event came 1769. While on a trip to Williamsburg to settle debts owed to his stepson Jacky. However, the man who owed Jacky money could not pay so an estate sale, of sorts, was arranged to raise the necessary funds. Unlike modern estates sales this one became a nightly slave raffle. Each night prospective buyers would purchase raffle tickets. Each ticket was a claim on a specific slave or group of slaves and, thus, varied in price depending on the value of the “prize”. Washington believed that this format would raise more money than a simple slave auction, as more people could afford to buy a chance at winning a valuable slave. While the raffle had the intended monetary effect, it left Washington morally shaken and “[h]e began to see that the business of slaveholding required transactions so foul that he could no longer stomach them.” (p. 185) The transactions in question were the divisions of families. Until this point Washington had left the buying and selling of slaves to his farm managers, so he had never truly seen the immediate dissolution of a slave family. This raffle, however, not only placed him at the scene of the crime but made him its chief architect and benefactor. Wiencek establishes this moment in time as Washington’s epiphany concerning slavery. Though Washington will continue to struggle with the moral hypocrisy of slavery in the face of Revolutionary ideals, it will be the monetary value of his “property” that prevent him from freeing him before his death.

As Wiencek moves through Washington’s life he illustrates how our first president became frustrated by an immoral system that could not be terminated. Washington knew, by the end of his life, that slavery was wrong, but he also understood that the fabric of Southern life was tied to it. Monetarily, socially and legally there was no way to stop what had been put into permanence after the Constitutional Convention. Slavery was a way of life for both farmers and presidents, as George and Martha set the example by bringing slaves with them to New York

when he took the reigns as the first President of the United States. It is here that Wiencek poses an interesting question about whether or not George Washington could have single handedly ended slavery. At this point in his life Washington was socially superior to all other Virginians and should not have feared becoming a social outcast for supporting emancipation. He was internationally renown and respected. His actions and words set examples for others to follow and he was considered a man of great foresight. If he had taken the step to free his slaves *while* he was Chief Executive, the feat may have set precedent. After all, “slavery was incompatible with holding the highest office” (p. 274) and completely contradicted the very rights that the Constitution stood to protect. Additionally, Washington began to see slaves as more than property. He saw them as families, men, children, and people not simply blacks destined to be slaves for life. (p. 274) Sadly, at least for someone looking back through modern lenses, Washington waited until his death to begin the emancipation process. Interestingly enough, however, it is this very fact that becomes such a teachable moment for modern students of American History!

When dealing with young history students, teachers become eager to instill a sense of pride and citizenship in their students; especially when it comes to American History. All too often our own biases come through when we discuss the great figures and regrettable events of our country’s past. Cautiously we must try to give a truthful, but balanced, view of the past and those who lived it. Slavery is arguably the greatest crime ever committed by our society, but that should not automatically condemn all who took part to be remembered as immoral and unethical criminals. As Wiencek points out, doing just this would mean that we “apply modern standards of ethics to people of the past in a way that is manifestly unfair, illogical and futile.” (p. 135) It is impossible to judge those in our past by using modern ethical and social norms. How, then, should we proceed. There are a number of ways to tackle this problem.

As a teacher in a district where only 25% of my students are white, this subject comes up every year. As I race through the review units of Colonial U.S. to Reconstruction (all of which

they studied the previous year) I am confronted with students who want to know why the men who believed “All men are created equal” still owned slaves. To begin with, I try to explain how our view of slavery is different from those living during slavery. For example, we see slaves as people whereas the slave owners saw them as property. In order to drive this home, I point out the condition of students’ sneakers, phones, books, and other possessions. Without fail some of these items are completely dilapidated. “Why”, I ask, “have you treated your own possessions with such disregard for their wellbeing?” Students immediately remind me that slaves are people (they bleed, cry, feel pain, have emotions, etc.) whereas the items I target are inanimate objects. After some more discussion, the idea starts to sink in that slaves were nothing more than objects to their owners.

At this point I ask the students to predict how the future will judge us. In order to do this, I have set up an analogy with our cars. We know that cars produce harmful pollution and that car accidents kill thousands of people every year. Yet we continue to drive gas-guzzlers, constantly disobey speed limits and almost obsessively drive enormous vehicles that aim to protect ourselves from other “bad” drivers. Knowing that none of this is good for society, should all families be forced to give up their cars without any compensation? More to the point, should they have to pay to give up their cars? True, this is a loose analogy, but it helps reinforce the fact that the value convenience of a slave made it difficult for farmers to consider emancipation.

There is another lesson that I have been toying with but have not had the time to implement. When discussing America’s heroes I would like to create a list all of the great deeds and infamous mistakes associated with each person. I would not connect any of this information to a particular person and would fill a page with facts about several different individuals. For example, I might present a list of facts such as: “This person founded one of the country’s top Universities.”, “This person believed that all men were created equal”, “This person owned slaves.”, “This person freed his slaves upon his death.”, “This person allowed free and enslaved blacks to fight in the Revolutionary War.” The list would be longer, more refined and include

facts from several different heroes. After each fact I would ask the students to record their first impression of “*This person*”. My hope is that students will believe that each individual fact relates to a single person and jump to a decision about how “good” or “bad” each must be. Only after they have passed judgment will I reveal which facts belong to which historical figure. Hopefully, at this point in the lesson, we can have a discussion centered on whether or not a man’s “good” deeds are outweighed by his “bad”. Should George Washington be vilified for owning slaves, or could he be considered an early pioneer for emancipation and remain our Founding Father? When Thomas Jefferson wrote, “All men are created equal”, was he including slaves in the definition of *men*? Was President Lincoln a moral crusader or a pragmatist? Finally, does the knowledge that Martin Luther King, Jr. cheated on his wife change the fact that his work forced the government to live up to our contemporary understanding of the Constitution? Some historians argue that such discussions only taint the image of great men, but I disagree. While the truth is not always pretty, and can be extremely difficult to explain, it humanizes our American heroes and reminds our younger generations that even the greatest men and women are not perfect.

## Bibliography

1. Wiencek, Henry. An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

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