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Final Project

'His Excellency: George Washington'
By Joseph J. Ellis

Described as “the American Zeus, Moses and Cincinnatus all rolled into one”, George Washington has been immortalized by historians and scholars alike for the better of two centuries. But none of these historians has captured George Washington the man, as carefully and meticulously as Joseph Ellis. “His Excellency” vividly takes the reader through Washington’s decorated life, starting from a “daring and resourceful twenty-one-year-old messenger sent on a dangerous mission into the American wilderness” during the French and Indian War to his two terms as Commander-and-Chief where he was assigned the role as “the man who unites all hearts.”

As a biography, Ellis builds upon the legend that is George Washington, which includes various stories of significant occasions and hard work, by breaking down Washington on the human level. According to Ellis, “we do not need to another epic, but rather a fresh portrait focused tightly on Washington’s character.” For instance, Ellis writes about the ambitious young Virginian who so desperately tried to impress the British elite, and in return, was denied a commission in the British army. Here, Ellis depicts the trials and tribulations of the young Washington, and focuses on how these particular mishaps shaped his future as a military leader and as the first President of the United States.

When the Revolutionary War broke out, the now General Washington, took the reigns over the Continental Army during the siege of Boston. “The American Revolution was the central event in Washington’s life, the crucible for his development as a mature

man, a prominent statesman, and a national hero.” During the war, Washington’s legend grew, but bizarrely had nothing to do with the amount of victories on the battlefield. “Indeed, he lost more battles than any victorious general in modern history,” says Ellis. Yet, it was Washington’s ability to strike at right moment that secured him his most important victory at Yorktown.

Washington’s time as President separated him from the other founding fathers, vaulting him to upper tier of political statesmen. Ellis states that Washington was a superior “judge of talent” and “surrounded himself with the most intellectually sophisticated collection of statesmen in American presidential history.” Washington received respect from his fellow constituents without demanding it. When the decision was made to create the executive branch, Washington was the unanimous choice. Not wanting to be crowned king, Washington refused to be addressed as “His Majesty” and thought “His Excellency” was more appropriate and demanding of status. Ellis also emphasizes Washington’s decision to relinquish power twice. First, Washington stepped down after the Revolutionary War to retire back to Virginia and secondly, he left the office of President after his second term. According to Ellis, this latter decision may have been Washington’s lasting legacy. “Life was all about power: facing it, taming it, channeling it, projecting it. His remarkably reliable judgement derived from his elemental understanding of how power worked in the world.”

Although Ellis spends much of the book humanizing Washington, the human aspect of this legendary figure becomes glaringly obvious when it comes to the issue of slavery. Washington as a lifelong slave-owner has been criticized for not freeing his slaves until after his death. As stated by Ellis, “Washington’s intervention at this

propitious moment could make the decisive difference in removing this stain on the revolutionary legacy, as well as his own.”

In his book, “His Excellency”, Joseph J. Ellis articulately depicts the life of one of America’s most iconic figures in George Washington. Looking beyond just the legend, Ellis opens the readers to a Washington that has never been seen before in a biography. From the days as a young surveyor from Virginia to the glorious leader who crossed the Delaware on Christmas morning, Ellis captures the essence of Washington the man, the myth, and the legend.

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