

TAH - A More Perfect Union: The Origins and Development of the U.S. Constitution

Book Review: “An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America” by Henry Wiencek

The several courses I’ve been privileged to take, through the Teaching American History grants, have enabled me to bring a deeper understanding and appreciation of our history to my students, coupled with anecdotal details and stories that help to bring our history to life – to make history more meaningful and interesting for them. I chose for my final project for this TAH course to read and review Henry Wiencek’s book “An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America” because I knew it would give me the opportunity to learn more about this leading figure of our nation’s founding. As a teacher of American history to eighth graders, I’m familiar with Washington’s contributions to our gaining independence in his role as Commander of the Continental Army, his influential presence as president of the Constitutional Convention, and his challenges and contributions as our nation’s first president, yet the man behind these titles remained much of a mystery to me. Here was an opportunity, I hoped, to learn more about what was in the mind and heart of the man we call the “Father of our Country” and about whom so many of my students display a natural curiosity –an opportunity to bring this imposing historical figure more to life for me and my students.

Wiencek did not disappoint. Instead of attempting to bring a new angle or new insight to the well known historical roles that Washington commanded, Wiencek focuses instead on Washington’s lifelong interactions with blacks. It is this history of Washington, reflective of the history of slavery and of race in our nation as well as one man’s “wrenching private conflict over race and slavery” (Wiencek, 13) that offers so much rich material for me to bring to my students. Wiencek’s book has given me a much closer, more intimate picture of Washington’s character and of the horrors of

slavery. In the paragraphs that follow, I'll share what I learned from Wiencek that I plan to incorporate into my teaching of Washington and his time. While much of it will be woven into class discussion as we study the resources I use for learning about Washington, I'm certain I will be reading directly from Wiencek as well.

Wiencek's honest, often disturbing portrait of Washington, the slave owner, "challenges the myth of Washington as the perfect secular god." (Wiencek, 12) For my students, learning that Washington owned slaves his entire life can be difficult to reconcile with the grand mythical figure who is the "Father of our Country". But though Wiencek's portrayal of Washington shows us this disturbing picture of him as a slave owner, it also shows us a man who, over the course of his life, unlike most of his peers, was capable of a change of heart and mind regarding slavery and who acted upon his changed beliefs by freeing his slaves upon his death. Wiencek begins with this redemption of Washington in his introduction which helps to carry the reader through the disheartening accounts that follow of slavery and Washington's part in it. And although it wasn't until the end of his life that he emancipated his slaves, Wiencek argues that one cannot therefore dismiss this act of Washington's as less than impressive: "Washington's emancipation of his slaves at Mount Vernon has long been dismissed as a mere parting grace note, of little significance except as a mark of his inherent benevolence. But the will hints at a profound moral struggle; indeed, his decision to free his slaves represented a repudiation of a lifetime of mastery. For his entire life he had been conditioned to be indifferent to the aspirations and humanity of African-Americans. Something happened to change him and to set him radically apart from his peers and his family." (Wiencek, 6) Wiencek reminds us that we have to view Washington in the context of his own time and the circumstances of his upbringing. I am reminded that I need to teach this way as well – to bring our historical figures to life in the setting and influences of their time. When we fully realize Washington in the setting of the Virginia planter class – as Wiencek does so well in the pages that follow his introduction – we

can better understand his acceptance and support of slavery and then come to admire his final “repudiation” of it. That repudiation is reflected in the “forcefulness” and vehemence of the language in Washington’s final will regarding the emancipation of his slaves. Wiencek informs us that Washington’s will uses the usual, polite legal language but “the emancipation clause stands out from the rest of Washington’s will in the unique forcefulness of its language...it has the iron firmness of a field order.” (Wiencek, 5)

Wiencek helps us to understand how significant a change this was in Washington, to free his slaves, as he describes the influences upon his upbringing in Virginia as part of the planter class. Wiencek quotes the historian David Hackett Fischer: “For Washington’s class, the social creed was fundamentally a form of stoicism...the stoic ideal...taught that one must fear nothing and accept whatever fate might bring with courage, honesty, dignity, and grace.” (Wiencek, 36-37) Washington devoted himself to this stoic ideal, practicing from youth rules to live by that would foster these character traits: “He governed himself by axioms in order to tame impulse...If he had *made a rule* to do something then he was immune to personal appeals, exceptions, and deviations. He would always do the right thing despite his personal inclination to do otherwise.” (Wiencek, 39) Wiencek emphasizes the words “made a rule” because his study of Washington revealed that it was only towards slavery that Washington eventually breaks his “rules”. Unlike other famous Virginia slave owners, Washington’s role as Commander of the Continental Army exposed him to the bravery, devotion, and ability of blacks on the battlefield. At first, “the consummate man of procedure had ‘made it a rule’ not to recruit blacks, but then he reversed himself because...it seems their personal appeals had moved him, that the humanity of these free black people made itself apparent to him.” (Wiencek, 204-205)

It is this “humanity” in the faces of free blacks as well as slaves that gradually worked the change of heart and mind in Washington towards slavery. Wiencek writes a moving account of the impact

that Phyllis Wheatley's poem for Washington must have had on him: "Today we can sense only the tiniest aftershock of the tremor this poem would have set off in the mind of a slaveholder."

(Wiencek, 208) He goes on to write: "After receiving Wheatley's poem, Washington did the unthinkable. He invited the black poet to his headquarters and temporary home in Cambridge. He wanted to meet this extraordinary woman whose talent he so admired." (Wiencek, 208) It is this meeting with Wheatley and his decision to admit free blacks to the army that Wiencek believes reveals Washington's "dawning awareness of something." Wiencek goes on to write "...one must credit Northern blacks for the general's newfound tendency, as tentative as it was, to put aside the customs of mastery and follow humane instincts. Their demeanor, spirit, and patriotism apparently touched him." (Wiencek, 214)

Wiencek believes Washington recognized humanity in the faces of his slaves as well. From studying his records, Wiencek found evidence that Washington knew his field slaves individually because he could describe them in great detail from memory. As he rode about his plantation on horseback, he must have gazed into their faces and noticed their individual characteristics. The evidence of this were the descriptive advertisements seeking the return of those slaves who had run away. (Wiencek, 98-99) This is important to note because, unlike so many of his peers who thought nothing of the suffering they caused as slave families were torn apart in the purchase and sale of individual slaves, Washington eventually came to abhor this practice. Wiencek's research led him to discover that "the first sign of Washington's very gradual change of heart regarding slavery was a sudden reluctance to break up families by sale. Something he had seen, something he had done, had stuck in his memory and become abhorrent to him. He began to see that the business of slaveholding required transactions so foul that he could no longer stomach them." (Wiencek, 185)

To help the reader better understand this "foul" business of slaveholding that was Washington's world, Wiencek recounts stories and describes slaveholding activities that are among the most

moving and disturbing that I have ever read. Wiencek describes the raffling off of slaves to pay off a planter's debts. Washington was involved in setting up this raffle which took place in a Williamsburg tavern and resulted in children being separated from parents and husbands and wives being sold off separately. (Wiencek, 178-180) Another is the rare letter from a slave in Virginia to a British official begging for help to end slavery. He describes the horrible way they are treated and how he has to endure being his white brother's slave. (Wiencek, 168-170) Wiencek uncovers advertisements from the *Virginia Gazette* which announce the auction of slaves. One in particular is especially horrifying as it is a notice for the sale of groups of young slave girls and boys, some as young as two or three: "We can only imagine the terror of the children, taken suddenly by strangers, trussed and shoved into a wagon." (Wiencek, 184) Throughout this foul business is the sexual exploitation of slave women by their masters. Wiencek provides first hand accounts of these "brutal encounters" (Wiencek, 306-307) that are so disturbing to read yet help, along with all his other accounts of slaves' deep desire for freedom, to remind us that only those who refused to recognize the humanity in their slaves could support such an wicked institution.

Washington's first biographer and a colonel who had served with him during the Revolutionary War, David Humphreys (Wiencek, 40-41) recognized the qualities in Washington that would not allow him to pretend, however more convenient, that blacks were not human or capable of human accomplishment, once his experience taught him otherwise: "He loved truth, he sought it unceasingly & he endeavored to regulate all his actions by that standard." Wiencek notes this quote of Humphreys' and continues: "In the last decade of his life Washington grasped some truth about slavery that was eluding everyone around him. Slavery had evolved into a system that his sense of justice could no longer tolerate." (Wiencek, 278) Washington had given up hope that his new country would emancipate the slaves in his lifetime; he knew his own wife and family would not agree to emancipation and would fight his decision. In the end, he had to keep "his emancipation a

secret.” (Wiencek, 353) The forceful, clear cut language in the emancipation clause of his will leaves no doubt of his intention or any room to change his plan of finally giving his slaves their freedom. And Wiencek points out that it is through this clause that we learn Washington was not a racist because his plan required his freed slaves to be educated: “Education for slaves – the very thought of it was revolutionary. With this clause Washington overturned generations of prejudice. Washington was not a racist; he did not believe that the slaves were inherently inferior people; he believed that the apparent deficiencies in African-Americans were the result of their enslavement, and that with education and the opportunity to find work they could prosper as a free people.” (Wiencek, 356) The comparison with another Virginian who struggled to reconcile himself with slavery is obvious here!

I must end with a description of a photo I saw in *Time Magazine* shortly after Barack Obama was elected President. It was a picture of Obama and his wife, Michelle, sharing a laugh at the White House. I found this picture particularly moving for, over their heads, seeming to look down upon them, was a portrait of Washington. The juxtaposition of our first president, a slave holder, looking upon our first black president, I found to be fascinating. Now, after having read this book of Wiencek’s, I believe Washington would approve, and perhaps not be too surprised, how far our nation has come since he was president!

Bibliography

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