

His excellency: george washington



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Joseph Ellis sets out to make George Washington, the person we think of as an icon, into a real person. He wants to show us what makes him tick. He wants to turn the marble into the man. So many students today see George Washington as a memorial, a monument, a face on a dollar bill, and the man who could not lie when he cut down the cherry tree. He wants to show us the man George Washington was in his day. Ellis's method was to divide George Washington's life into three main parts:

1. Events that transpired during the French and Indian War
2. His part as general in the American Revolution
3. His actions as President of the United States

When writing the biography of George Washington, Ellis uses some primary sources such as George Washington's own letters, and official papers. He also uses secondary resources including manuscripts and printed/published sources, newspaper articles, as well as accounts from other leaders in his era to back his writing. Ellis doesn't just tell the story of the first president, but is careful to provide the data from which he is working, and then to present his understanding. Ellis dissects the events of Washington's experiences and tries to provide a blueprint of what he learned from them. He discusses each event in Washington's life, and how the outcomes would affect his future actions, and would mold him into the man he would eventually become.

His Excellency is a fairly short book compared to many books about this era in time. Ellis writes the book in difficult to understand vocabulary which causes you to spend as much time understanding it, or learning the meaning

of his words, as you do reading his book. He is attempting to use his language to paint pictures in our mind. The book would be more enjoyable if the wording was toned down to make it an easier read without trying to look between the lines for hidden meaning, and decipher each sentence that Ellis used. He does point out several stories about George Washington that are not true for example, the story about the cherry tree and the fact he could not lie..

His Excellency is divided into seven different chapters; 1) Interior Regions 2) The Strenuous Squire 3) First in War 4) Destiny's Child 5) Introspective Interlude 6) First in Peace, and 7) Testament. Each chapter in the book covers a part of George Washington's life. It begins with Washington as a 21 year old serving as a messenger in enemy terrain during the French/Indian war, which we have learned for our past test is also known as the seven year war. Instead of going to school like many men his age, George instead decided to fight in the war. All of the forces that were put under him were defeated and this upset and extremely frustrated him. He was forced to witness his own group of soldiers get massacred because of decisions he had made.

The following chapters portray the sections of Washington life when he was a soldier, his days as a general, and his duty as the president. The book details the military plights Washington faced as a leader. Ellis says that Washington "lost more battles than he won; indeed, he lost more battles than any victorious general in modern history." The War for Independence emerged as the most significant milestone in George Washington's life, a time in which he evolved into a grown man, a notorious politician, and a national icon. Ellis

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does not take us through each battle in detail, but describes the events that shaped Washington's life and made him a human just like us.

Washington didn't let things get him down, he learned from his errors, dusted himself off and forged on. One of the best decisions that George made was to marry a very wealthy widow, Martha Dandridge Custis even though his heart belonged to another woman. He thought with his head, not his heart and this was one of the many strategies he used to work his way up the ladder to become the head of Mount Vernon, and the very first president. By marrying Martha this provided Washington property and social standing. When George Washington died he was one of the richest men in America.

Ellis illustrates the vulnerability during the first years of this Great Nation. The early colonist didn't have as much of an idea of what they were doing although this is not represented in American History we have come to know. They had to "wing it" when building this country because they didn't have a set of plans to follow, as this hadn't been a venture taken before. This was also evident in George Washington's role as President. He made up the rules as he went and many presidents after him used his presidency as their reference. He made mistakes, but he learned from them. When you compare George Washington with the presidents of today, it doesn't seem like a lot has changed. He was probably a better president than some we have had in the past 20 years or so. Everybody has their own opinion of presidents, but at least now the leaders have different models to follow that were not available to George Washington.

Ellis tells how Washington was a big statured man, that was very strong, and would in today's times be viewed as an athletic hero. He towered over most men, and had an air of excellency about him. He was envied by many, and revered by most. Ellis explains that Washington could have made himself king, because he had so many loyal followers, and a group of soldiers that worshiped him in the army that he commanded. Even his friends thought he was superior and wanted to be like him. He had made some good strategic purchases along with his marriage that put him in the Virginia elite. It was almost as if Washington was untouchable. It was even said that he could go through a field of bullets and come out unscathed. Although the book shows so many of Washington's great moves, and how people looked up to him, it also shows many of his flaws.

He still took risks that were commendable. If it wasn't for his bravery, and persistence the country we know as America could have turned out very different. Realizing how delicate the new nation was, Washington tried very hard to create what we would call "Patriotism". Washington's birth day was as big of a celebration as the fourth of July. As president he was took into account the diverse attitudes and interests of the country and used these differences to make the melting bowl of America strong. Washington traveled across the country so more Americans could experience the formation of government and meet the President in person. He advocated the building of roads and canals as well as the post office – he tried to bring the separate states together as a country. He wanted people to see the big picture of America rather than the division of each state or colony.

Ellis wanted to make Washington comprehensible as a human being, and more than just a statue or one of our founding fathers. He achieves his goal. He points out two characteristics that caused Washington to act as he did. One was the fact that Washington was consumed by what people thought of him. Washington wanted to impress the very smart and very wealthy people of his time. He was what we would call in today's world as very superficial. He had to restrain his emotions and feelings deep inside him to do this.

He appeared calm and collected on the outside while he was fighting an internal war with himself. Ellis also points out that in Washington's era your character was not only based on the person you were, but what other people thought of you. Back then they would play a part, as if they were acting. They would become the person they thought others wanted them to be. Washington's characters progressed and became more exalted until he turned into himself into his idea of a king or someone so grand that they couldn't be human.

His Excellency paints a true picture of Washington as a real man and provides the reader a different view of Washington than we have acquired from the stories we have read in American History textbooks. Mr. Ellis proves that Washington was mortal, he made decisions based on what was good himself, for his wallet, and his future in politics and property. Americans put him on a pedestal and put his portrait on everything from our money to our country's capital. He is no doubt the most recognized president, and one president that we all know something about. We hold him as a sacred god and Ellis does a wonderful job of proving that even though he was our first President, he was still merely a man.

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