

*George Washington's*  
**SACRED FIRE**

ABRIDGED EDITION

**PETER A. LILLBACK**  
WITH JERRY NEWCOMBE

**R&R**  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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This book is dedicated with gratitude to the memory and legacy of the Rev. Dr. D. James Kennedy.

His passion for the gospel of Christ and the liberties of America early in the author's ministry inspired his efforts, and later enabled him to publish *George Washington's Sacred Fire*.

May this abridgement of that work rekindle the flame of Christian faith, so faithfully pursued by Dr. Kennedy.

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# *Foreword*

The United States celebrates the 250th anniversary of its independence on July 4, 2026. It was two days before the United States' formal Declaration of Independence, however—on July 2, 1776—that the Continental Congress voted on independence from Great Britain. We celebrate on the Fourth the anniversary of the proclamation of the Declaration, but it was two days earlier when the delegates took their collective deep breath and voted “Aye.”

General George Washington was not with the Continental Congress that day or on the Fourth. The indispensable man was with the Continental Army he commanded, on Long Island, New York, as a crisis approached. British warships escorting fifty British transports full of Redcoats had sailed between Staten Island and Long Island the night before and had begun landing the troops with whom Washington's forces would soon engage.

General Washington's orders of the day on July 2, 1776, issued as usual, began with passwords and then moved on to alert his troops to the inevitable battle ahead. “The fate of unborn Millions will now depend, under God, on the Courage and Conduct of this army,” the general wrote. “Let us therefore rely upon the goodness of the Cause, and the aid of the supreme Being, in whose hands Victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble Actions.”<sup>1</sup>

Those are the words of a man of faith facing a crisis as the British regulars outnumber his troops, who were only beginning to jell as an army and one that lacked much in the way of supplies. They are also the words of a believer in a God active in the affairs of men, a God to whom appeals could be made and from whom dispositions would come.

The Continentals would have to retreat following the Battle of Long Island late in the next month of August. General Washington was obliged to evacuate the entire army to Manhattan, and did so without the loss of a single life or even supplies.

The Continental Army was then driven out of Manhattan entirely after several more defeats and was forced to retreat through New Jersey to Pennsylvania. The great success on Christmas Eve that year when Washington led the troops across the Delaware to a critical victory would be followed by the hardest of years, ending in the desperate winter encampment at Valley Forge in 1777–78. In victory and defeat, for year after year, Washington held the Continental Army together and through it the young country. What held Washington together was his faith in God.

The battles that had begun in 1775 would not end until October 19, 1781. General Washington endured through that long and difficult series of campaigns full of victories and defeats, but ultimately Yorktown and the surrender and capitulation of the British. Success for the United States would not have been possible without Washington. The country relied on him, and as the order of the day of July 2 shows, Washington relied on God.

For the better part of a generation, the voices of secular absolutism have assiduously worked to persuade Americans in the new millennium that the founders of their country were a secret society of secularists. Certainly, a vast diversity of religious beliefs existed among the tens of thousands who took up arms to defend the Declaration of Independence. The men who framed the Declaration, the Articles of Confederation, and finally the Constitution and its first ten amendments that make up the Bill of Rights came from people with beliefs ranging from every sort of Christian tradition to none at all.

Thomas Paine, author of the pamphlet *Common Sense* that set many men marching, was a voluble atheist. James Madison, vital to the structure of the Constitution that endures, was raised in the Anglican Church, schooled by the great Presbyterian president of Princeton John Witherspoon, and guarded in his profession of faith as an adult, even as he assured all of freedom of exercise in the First Amendment, which he introduced into the First Congress. Charles Carroll was the only Roman Catholic to

sign the Declaration (and the longest-lived of all those patriots). Thomas Jefferson is often described as a deist, but if he was, he was a mighty unusual one, for he declared about the blight of slavery on the young country when he wrote in *Notes on Virginia*: “Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever.”<sup>2</sup> John Adams described himself as a “church-going animal”<sup>3</sup> and moved among many denominations. About Ben Franklin, who can say? He proposed daily prayer at the Constitutional Convention, was adamant about religious liberty, was a brilliant man of the Enlightenment, and was a rascal.

The framers and founders, then, were not unlike the men and women of America 250 years later—spread out along a broad spectrum of religious beliefs that range from stridently atheist to deep faith in every religion present in the world today. These beliefs cannot all be true, of course. Christians believe only one religion to be wholly true. But they are all here in this remarkable country.

But what about George Washington, the indispensable man, the Father of Our Country, a man for whom *rectitudinous* is perhaps the most appropriate adjective? “The truth,” Dr. Lillback writes in this, the definitive study of the faith of George Washington, is that the first president “was an eighteenth-century Anglican, an orthodox, Trinity-affirming believer in Jesus Christ, who also affirmed the historic Christian Gospel of a Savior who died for sinners and was raised to life.”

Dr. Lillback does not “bury the lede,” as journalists are often warned not to do. Dr. Lillback instead practices the best form: Tell readers what you are going to say, say it, and then tell them again what you have said. Editors insist on clarity, and for Dr. Lillback’s clarity—and the vast research and effort on which it rests—I am grateful.

I am not, however, surprised by Dr. Lillback’s conclusions about George Washington’s Christian faith. I have lived off and on less than ten miles from Mount Vernon, George Washington’s beloved estate, where he and Mary Washington rest in peace. I have attended services at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria, Virginia, as did Washington, and have visited Christ Church, where Washington was a vestryman, purchased pew no. 5, and supported the church financially.

I have also marveled at the enormous statue of Washington in the Masonic Temple of Alexandria, and know that his friend Colonel John Fitzgerald helped establish St. Mary's Catholic Church in 1795, now a basilica that abuts the Old Presbyterian Meeting House, and that the general is believed to have contributed to the fundraising necessary to open the oldest Roman Catholic communion in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

While I greatly admire the scholarship of Dr. Lillback in this, the abridged edition of his original twelve-hundred-page best-selling book of the same title, I am especially grateful for the succinct summary of President Washington's faith as that of an "orthodox, Trinity-affirming believer in Jesus Christ," one whom C. S. Lewis would later almost certainly classify in his book *Mere Christianity* as a "mere Christian." For that compact description contains worlds, because "mere Christianity" contains worlds.

Our country has been blessed since its very founding with a diversity of religious beliefs that is astonishing. Again, they cannot all be true, for many make competing and often diametrically opposed claims. In the opening line of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution is the heart and soul of our collective religious history and, I venture to guess, Washington's summary view on the subject of how the nation ought to treat faith: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

It seems impossible to me for any fair reader to read the general's order of the day in the desperate summer of 1776 and not conclude the obvious: that George Washington believed in, depended on, and called others to depend on a sovereign God who was dynamically alive and active in the affairs of the world that he had created.

It is also impossible for me to believe that Washington was other than a firm believer in the necessity of religious pluralism as a governing structure for the new nation. His letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, of August 18, 1790, reads in crucial part:

May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants;

while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Lillback provides the compelling case for Washington's orthodox Christian views. It is overwhelming of any argument to the contrary in its detail and careful reading of the available papers. If you are pressed for evidence, turn first to Dr. Lillback's summary, and then add to it Washington's admonition to his troops on July 2, 1776, and his hope, drawn from the book of Micah and expressed to the Jewish congregants in Rhode Island, that "every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid," and your argument will be over.

But your *reading* of Dr. Lillback's engrossing book should not. To study Washington is to study greatness. In a conversation with the famous American-born historical painter Benjamin West, who lived in London and who held the office of Surveyor of the King's Pictures, King George III asked him

what would Washington do were America to be declared independent. West said He believed He would retire to a private situation.—The king said if He did He would be the greatest man in the world.<sup>5</sup>

What made Washington great? Obviously, his victory in the Revolutionary War and his tenure as our first president. But those are things he did. What made him act in such a manner as to allow those magnificent achievements to occur? For the answer to that question, you will need to read *Sacred Fire—Abridged*.

Hugh Hewitt  
Professor of Law, Chapman University, Fowler School of Law  
Host of the nationally syndicated radio program  
The Hugh Hewitt Show

## *Foreword Endnotes*

1. "General Orders, 2 July 1776," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-05-02-0117>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 5, *16 June 1776–12 August 1776*, ed. Philander D. Chase (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 179–82.]
2. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston: Lilly and Wait, 1832), 170.
3. "From John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 28 August 1811," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5678>.
4. "George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 6, *1 July 1790–30 November 1790*, ed. Mark A. Mastromarino (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 284–86.]
5. Joseph Farington, *The Farington Diary*, ed. James Greig, 3rd ed. (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923), 1:278.

# *Preface*

In 2026, as America celebrates the 250th anniversary of its epic-making Declaration of Independence, I will also celebrate the twentieth anniversary of *George Washington's Sacred Fire (GWSF)*,<sup>1</sup> a scholarly book that carefully documents that George Washington was not a Deist but a Christian. It documents the deep role that faith, Scripture, and Christianity played in the illustrious life and career of our most famous Founding Father. *GWSF* became a bestseller and has been in print since 2006. For this, Dr. Jerry Newcombe, my co-author, and I are truly grateful to the Lord and to our many readers!

*GWSF* was birthed in controversy. President Ronald Reagan declared 1983 to be the Year of the Bible. I was in my first pastorate in Oxford, Pennsylvania, and the moderator of our session at Bethany Presbyterian Church was a Gideon who distributed children's Bible story books in local schools. As soon as the ACLU discovered this, they forced the schools to stop this practice. I was astounded! On the one hand, President Reagan had declared 1983 to be the Year of the Bible; on the other hand, I had just finished reading Francis Schaeffer's *A Christian Manifesto*,<sup>2</sup> which made me aware that like so many other pastors in America, I had been far too quiet about national issues that Christians have a duty to address, for example, the sanctity of life and the Christian voice in the public square of culture and political life. So, I wrote a letter to the local newspaper, arguing that the ACLU's coercion and the school's capitulation were incongruent with the national Year of the Bible. Young and naive, I did not realize that when you stick your head out of your foxhole, the enemy will shoot at you!

The shooting started the next week, when the local newspaper published the ACLU's response to my letter, where they accused me of failing

to understand the Constitution, the meaning of the “separation of church and state,” and that the Founding Fathers were Deists, not Christians. I was startled, humbled, and embarrassed. I was a Reformation scholar, not a student of American history. Maybe my knowledge of American history needed reforming! Perhaps my understanding that America was founded as a faith-friendly nation that welcomed the Bible and Christianity was incorrect.

Chastened, I decided to do what scholars do: read and research. I visited the local Lincoln University library, where I discovered an award-winning book,<sup>3</sup> written by a presidential historian, on George Washington’s religion—sounded perfect! To my chagrin this lauded author argued that Washington, like all the other founders (he said), were Deists. There was no room for a personal God in their worldview. Even worse, the author contended that Washington rarely read the Bible, that when referring to it he did so in jest, and that testimonies to Washington’s spirituality were apocryphal and made by people who were untutored in Washington’s writings.

Determined to understand Washington’s faith, I took a deep breath and proceeded to read the book carefully, willing to be corrected by the facts. About halfway through the book, I had an epiphany! The more Washington quotes I read, the clearer it became that they were suffused with biblical allusions and paraphrases that should be apparent to any Bible-reader.

This epiphany led to my setting a goal that took over twenty years to reach: thoroughly research George Washington’s faith. To do this, I read the vast corpus of Washington’s writings; visited Washington archives at Mount Vernon, the Library of Congress, The Boston Athenaeum, and Harvard University to study original source material; and accessed the holdings of libraries and historical societies in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania to further my research. Villanova University’s voluminous collection of sources on Washington’s life and thought was especially helpful. Over the years, my notes and copies of articles grew longer and larger. My research began as a scholarly hobby; I did not have a publishing goal in mind. I figured that when I reached my goal of

thoroughly researching Washington's faith, I would store my notes and materials in boxes, satisfied that I now understood his faith, and then I would call it a day. But God had other plans!

In the early 2000s, the late Dr. D. James Kennedy, to whom this book is dedicated, planned to come to Philadelphia to film a program that would document the Christian faith of Americans during the founding era of our nation. During this planning phase, Dr. Kennedy learned that he could not film at one of Philadelphia's historic churches because of his strong, nationally-known biblical views, and so his associate, Dr. Jerry Newcombe, called the Rev. Paul Karlberg, pastor of Proclamation Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, to inquire about other possible venues. That call resulted in my meeting Dr. Newcombe, and we quickly discovered that we shared a common interest in George Washington. Dr. Newcombe was intrigued by my Washington project, told Dr. Kennedy about it, and Dr. Kennedy graciously offered to publish my research, if I could turn it into a book within a year.

The late Dr. Jack Templeton provided a gracious grant that enabled Dr. Newcombe to provide extensive assistance in writing and editing *GWSF*, whose publication in 2006 by The Providence Forum Press was underwritten by a grant from Dr. Kennedy's Coral Ridge Ministry Media. Approximately 20,000 copies were printed.

When, after a couple of years, the book's inventory fell below 1,000 copies, a truly remarkable event occurred. Through the strategic leadership of Mr. Ralf Augstroze, a copy of the book was placed into the hands of Glenn Beck, who at the time was a national Fox News commentator with a daily audience of over 1 million viewers. To my surprise (and delight!), he endorsed *GWSF* on his radio program *and* on his television program, where he interviewed me twice! As a result of this national publicity, The Providence Forum received an order from Barnes and Noble for 80,000 copies of the book, to be fulfilled within 30 days. But the Forum was out of funds and out of books! Again, something amazing—indeed something *providential*—happened! A new friend of the Forum who had made a substantial gift in support of a possible TV mini-series on George Washington's life redirected those funds so that the order could be fulfilled!

As Dr. Newcombe and I look back, we often jest that we should thank the ACLU for lighting the match that resulted in the publication of *George Washington's Sacred Fire*. Over the past twenty years, we have been asked to create an abridged version of *GWSF* that preserves its main argument and key texts. *George Washington's Sacred Fire—Abridged* is the fulfillment of that request. Readers are encouraged to consult the original for additional insights.

The words *Sacred Fire* in the title of both books come from Washington's First Inaugural Address (1789), where he said: "The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the Republican model of Government, are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people." I believe this *sacred fire* should be understood in the context of Washington's faith-filled words, spoken eleven years earlier (1778) at Valley Forge, where he said: "While we are zealously performing the duties of good Citizens and soldiers we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of Religion—To the distinguished Character of Patriot, it should be our highest Glory to add the more distinguished Character of Christian." Washington exhorted his troops to maintain a proper perspective on their *duties*. The highest duty, Washington said to his men, was not being a good citizen-soldier but being a Christian. A certain type of glory accompanies good citizen-soldiers, but the highest type of glory accompanies Christians. The character of a Christian is of greater worth than the character of a patriot, because the character of the former is the character of Christ.

As America celebrates the 250th anniversary of its epic-making Declaration of Independence and its profound influence across the globe, I pray that George Washington's deep and unwavering Christian faith may encourage our nation not only to cherish "the sacred fire of liberty" but also to hold more dearly that "highest glory"—"the distinguished character of Christian."<sup>4</sup>

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## *Preface Endnotes*

1. Peter A. Lillback, *George Washington's Sacred Fire* (Philadelphia: Providence Forum Press, 2006).

2. Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1981).

3. Paul F. Boller, *George Washington and Religion* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963).

4. An excellent place to begin investigating the worldview of America's Founders is, Matthew Spalding, *The Making of the American Mind: The Story of Our Declaration of Independence* (New York: Encounter Books, 2025).

# *Acknowledgments*

Books can be beautiful, for both readers and authors. To intentionally borrow and amend an observation by Scottish politician Paul Sweeny, “There is no substitute for books in our lives. You know you’ve read a good book when you turn the last page and feel a little as if you’re saying goodbye to a friend. A well-written book is like a garden, carried in your briefcase or back pack. There is more treasure in a great book than in all the pirate’s loot on Treasure Island.”

To alter Sweeny’s celebration of books even more, surely every author must agree that there would be no good books at all if it weren’t for those who either fund such books, or who assure that every word from the first page to the last is accurate, intelligible, and orderly. Without such friends, readers and authors alike would say good riddance and be happy to consign the book to the recycling bin.

It is because there are such funders, friends, and fixers that *George Washington’s Sacred Fire—Abridged* is in your hands and in your briefcase or back pack. It is my sincere desire to acknowledge the essential and extensive help by many who have enabled this book to see the light of day.

I apologize to any of those essential people or special friends that may have been overlooked due to the passing of so many years since this project began. It is my desire to honor each and every one with a heartfelt thank you and an affirmation of deep appreciation. To these that I have been able to remember, I now declare my great appreciation for their friendship and faithful support and labors that have made this project possible.

I first express my deep gratitude to special funders, who have also been dear friends, especially the late Dr. Jack Templeton and to Steve Huff.

## Acknowledgments

I am truly grateful for my co-writer, Dr. Jerry Newcombe, who not only helped me write the original version, but who also made the first painful cut to get the 1,200-page book reduced to manageable size for an abridged version.

I am conscious that this abridged work would never have existed without the original Philadelphia-based board of The Providence Forum as well as staff members who made *George Washington's Sacred Fire* possible. These friends include Alex Thompson, Joe Roskos, Curt Cheyney, Pricie Hanna, Scott Jenkins, Paul Reid, Ralf Augstroze, Dave Wiedis, Chris Blasko, John Kenyon, Steve Fisher, Rob Westman, Rob Pacienza, and Larry Musick. I am thankful as well for help from my daughters, Cara-Beth Lillback and Priscilla Edwards.

I thank the board of Coral Ridge Ministries Media and Dr. Rob Pacienza for keeping *George Washington's Sacred Fire* in print after The Providence Forum was moved to Fort Lauderdale, thereby keeping interest alive in its message, making an abridgement desirable.

When a book of such size with so many endnotes is reduced in length, a great deal of editing is required. Here I state my thankfulness to the diligent work of Chase Daws and Warren Campbell, who performed careful review and editing for this project when they were students at Westminster Theological Seminary. Their work was further reviewed and perfected by Westminster Theological Seminary students Robert Cone and Kenneth Owens. Thank you so much, Robert and Kenneth!

The cover design by renowned artist Dale Roberts is an authorized copy of his new outstanding encaustic painting that was dedicated in May 2025 near Valley Forge. Permission has been granted for his work to be used on the cover design. I am truly thankful for this and for the professional photo of the painting that he graciously provided for this purpose. Permission to use this image is found at the end of the book in a section entitled, "About the Cover." Thank you so very much Dale for your artistry and your gracious generosity that adorns the cover of this book. His beautiful painting is entitled, *Guidance* that simultaneously and beautifully captures the faith, strength and patriotism of America's "indispensable man."

## *Acknowledgments*

I remain grateful for the excellent support provided by Mrs. Alexandra Thompson that enabled the accurate and massive apparatus of the original work that in turn has definitely shaped the quality of the Abridgment. Thank you, Alex! Some of the designs used here are from the first book and were created by Judy Mitchell. I thank her again for her artistic expertise that continues to be a valuable enhancement in this abridgement.

I am grateful for friends from Proclamation Presbyterian Church past and present who provided the home base for the original work, particularly the Rev. Paul Karlberg, now retired. Paul was the Associate Pastor during the first book's creation, and fielded the initial contact with Dr. Newcombe, informing him of my research on Washington. Paul, thank you for making my contact with Jerry Newcombe possible. Your faithful labors provided the first steps for Jerry to later become the co-writer of the first book, and a key editor of this shorter work.

I thank my senior team at Westminster Theological Seminary who have encouraged my work in this non-seminary topic of the faith of George Washington. Their friendship and support in countless ways—including cheering on my interest in the founding of America—is and has long been a great blessing. Thank you, Jim Sweet, Dave Garner, Chun Lai, Jerry Timmis, and Steve Carter. I am grateful as well for my faithful and diligent executive assistant John Suh who has been ever ready and effective in assisting with any loose ends needing to be addressed to get this book to print.

I am also grateful for authors who have become friends in recent years due to our shared love for George Washington. Their encouragement and wisdom have aided me in completing this work. And so in particular, I express my gratitude to Dr. Kenneth Lawson, Dr. Richard Gardiner, and Mr. Dale Mason. Their love for America's founding has been energizing and appreciated.

I gladly declare my gratitude to P&R Publishing, not only for agreeing to publish this abridgement, but also for providing excellent editors, for further reduction in the size of the manuscript, and to assure accuracy. This work was carefully done by Mary Ruth Murdoch. Thank you, Mary Ruth! And for the final touches, to get all the remaining logistics such as

## *Acknowledgments*

illustrations and form ironed out, I proclaim a warm and heartfelt thank you to my friend John Hughes.

And last, but not least, I thank my wife Debbie, who has ever deployed her spirit of excellence in all she does. She has made our home a refuge now for more than fifty years. Her loving care for our family has made all my writing possible.

Now, dear reader, it is up to you to determine if this book is well-written and perhaps a little like a garden in your briefcase. Whether or not you discover any treasure herein, please know that I treasure these friends who have made this book possible.

# *Introduction*

*“To the distinguished Character of Patriot, it should be our highest  
Glory to add the more distinguished Character of Christian.”*

General George Washington’s General Orders at Valley Forge  
(May 2, 1778)<sup>1</sup>

Was George Washington a Christian—a theist who believes in the Trinitarian God of Scripture? Statements such as this—“George Washington was, like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, a deist”<sup>2</sup>—are commonplace among scholars, even though Washington *explicitly* identified himself as a Christian and *never* identified himself as a Deist.<sup>3</sup>

The thesis of this book is that Washington most definitely was a Christian and that one cannot rightly understand his life and vast impact on America without properly understanding how his deep Christian faith informed and influenced his values, thinking, and behavior.

## **The 1778 Eyewitness Testimony of the Rev. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg**

Consider this 1778 description of General Washington while he was at Valley Forge:

I heard a fine example today, namely, that His Excellency General Washington rode around among his army yesterday and admonished each and every one to fear God . . . [and] to practice the Christian virtues. From all appearances, this gentleman does not belong to the so-called world of society, for he respects God’s

Word, believes in the atonement through Christ, and bears himself in humility and gentleness. Therefore, the Lord God has also . . . marvelously preserved him from harm in the midst of countless perils, [ambushes], fatigues, etc., and has hitherto graciously held him in his hand as a chosen vessel.<sup>4</sup>

A respector of “God’s Word”? A believer in “the atonement through Christ”? A “chosen vessel” whom “the Lord God has . . . held . . . in his hand”? For many, this all seems preposterous—perhaps a fiction of so-called Christian nationalists or of an amateur historian who plays fast and loose with facts to create a narrative that is indemonstrable by the canons of historiography. Yet this was written by an *eyewitness*, and not merely by any contemporary of Washington. This was written by a minister—a Lutheran minister—the missionary father of Lutheranism in America, the Rev. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg. But Rev. Muhlenberg was more than the father of the newly planted Lutheran Church in the colonies. He was the father of one of Washington’s friends from Virginia, Brigadier General Peter Muhlenberg, who was with Washington at Valley Forge in 1777–78 and served with him throughout the Revolutionary War.

The elder Muhlenberg’s encounter with General Washington occurred when the retired minister, now residing only miles away from Valley Forge, came to visit his son (also a minister) in the American camp. The elder Rev. Muhlenberg’s testimony about Washington’s Christian faith—apparently learned from his ministerial and military-officer son—was not written as a propaganda piece for a colonial newspaper. It was part of his ministerial missionary report, written in German, and sent back to his Lutheran brethren in Germany.

### **The Reason for This Book**

Was Muhlenberg’s report accurate? Does the evidence that has endured from this long-ago era support his claim? To substantiate the assertion that Washington was a sincere Christian, I published the twelve-hundred-page national bestseller *George Washington’s Sacred Fire* in 2006.<sup>5</sup> Realizing that

not everyone has time to read twelve hundred pages, and in light of the many requests I've received to provide a condensed version of the facts, I have written *George Washington's Sacred Fire—Abridged*. This new book presents the same arguments as the original (which have withstood two decades of review and critique), only simplified and shortened, so that a new generation of readers can engage with the faith and character of George Washington.

## **Washington's 1778 Directive to His Troops at Valley Forge**

In addition to the eyewitness testimony of people such as Rev. Muhlenberg that Washington was a Christian, on multiple occasions Washington publicly affirmed his Christian faith. For example, on May 2, 1778, at Valley Forge, Washington said:

The Commander in Chief directs that divine Service be performed every Sunday at 11 o'clock in those Brigades to which there are Chaplains—those which have none to attend the places of worship nearest to them—It is expected that Officers of all Ranks will by their attendance set an Example to their men.

While we are zealously performing the duties of good Citizens and soldiers we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of Religion—To the distinguished Character of Patriot, it should be our highest Glory to add the more distinguished Character of Christian—The signal Instances of providential Goodness which we have experienced and which have now almost crowned our labours with complete Success, demand from us in a peculiar manner the warmest returns of Gratitude and Piety to the Supreme Author of all Good.<sup>6</sup>

No self-respecting Deist would address his men with the overtly Christian declaration: “To the distinguished Character of Patriot, it should be our highest Glory to add the more distinguished Character of Christian.” No wonder Rev. Muhlenberg left the Valley Forge encampment with a deep sense of the authenticity of General Washington's Christian faith!

## Washington's 1783 Letter to the Governors of the Newly Independent States

Consider a second example of Washington's publicly affirming his Christian faith. On Sunday, June 8, 1783, victorious General Washington sent a personal letter to each of the governors of the newly independent states. In that letter, Washington offers a prayer for his new nation—a prayer that only a Christian would pray—knowing that it would be seen by the world. In his “earnest prayer” for the governors and their fellow citizens, Washington prayed:

I now make it my earnest prayer, that God would have you and the State over which you preside, in his holy protection that he would incline the hearts of the Citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to Government, to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for their brethren who have served in the field—and finally that he would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all to do Justice, to love mercy and to demean ourselves, with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.<sup>7</sup>

Washington's words “to do Justice, to love mercy and to demean ourselves, with . . . humility” are a close paraphrase of Micah 6:8.<sup>8</sup> “Our blessed Religion” is the Christian religion, with which Washington identifies by using the word *our*. Unlike Deism, the “blessed Religion” of which Washington spoke is a *revealed* religion that has been given to us by a *divine, personal* God who has revealed *himself* to be both merciful and just—one whom Washington calls us to follow in “humble imitation.” You will not find an ounce of Deism in Washington's letter to the governors!

## **President Washington's Letter Drafted for the First Congress**

Just before Washington assumed the presidency, he wrote down his musings about the future of the newly ratified Constitution:

The blessed Religion revealed in the word of God [Christianity] will remain an eternal and awful monument to prove that the best Institutions may be abused by human depravity; and that they may even, in some instances be made subservient to the vilest of purposes. Should, hereafter, those who are intrusted with the management of this government, incited by the lust of power and prompted by the supineness or venality of their Constituents, overleap the known barriers of this Constitution and violate the unalienable rights of humanity: it will only serve to shew, that no compact among men (however provident in its construction and sacred in its ratification) can be pronounced everlasting and inviolable—and if I may so express myself, that no wall of words—that no mound of parchmt can be so formed as to stand against the sweeping torrent of boundless ambition on the one side, aided by the sapping current of corrupted morals on the other.<sup>9</sup>

Using words that no Deist could have penned, Washington referred to Christianity as “the blessed Religion revealed in the word of God,” and warned that when “abused by human depravity,” the best institutions can be corrupted.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Washington's settled conviction was that no words on a piece of paper can withstand unbridled political ambition that remains unchecked because of an immoral electorate—not even if they are the words written in the Constitution. This almost sounds like the evening news!

## **Washington's 1796 Farewell Address to the Nation**

Consider a third example in which Washington publicly affirmed his Christian faith, albeit subtly. In harmony with his “earnest prayer” for the

governors and their fellow citizens in 1783, President Washington's farewell address published on September 19, 1796, continued his insistence on the vital importance of the nation's being shaped by "religious principle." Washington said:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

'Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule indeed extends with more or less force to every species of free Government. Who that is a sincere friend to it, can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?<sup>11</sup>

"Religion and morality," Washington declared, are "indispensable supports" for "political prosperity." In fact, authentic "Patriotism," in his view, demands the maintenance of "these great Pillars of human happiness." This is because they are the "firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens." Therefore, Washington warns against the Deist claim that "morality can be maintained without religion." Morality requires religion as its foundation, and for Washington, that religion was, as we have seen, that "blessed Religion," which has been given to us by its "Divine Author."

## **Conclusion**

From Valley Forge to his farewell address, George Washington linked religion, morality, and patriotism. This no Deist would do. This is what a Christian would do and does.<sup>12</sup>

As America continues to debate the just application of the Jeffersonian metaphor of “a wall of separation between Church & State,”<sup>13</sup> let us remember Washington’s declaration that “Religion and morality” are the “great Pillars of human happiness.” They are the “firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens” that support the entire edifice of our constitutional government.

It is my hope that as you begin your engagement with George Washington’s “sacred fire,” you will join me in hearkening to Washington’s clarion call issued at the nadir of the American quest for independence: “To the distinguished Character of Patriot,” may it be “our highest Glory to add the more distinguished Character of Christian.” May this be true today in our nation, starting with you and me.

## *Introduction Endnotes*

1. George Washington, “General Orders, 2 May 1778,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-15-02-0016> (original source: George Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 15, *May–June 1778*, ed. Edward G. Lengel, Revolutionary War Series [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006], 13).

2. James Thomas Flexner, *The Forge of Experience* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1965), 244–45. This is the first volume of Flexner’s masterful, special Pulitzer Prize–winning four-volume biography of Washington.

3. Unlike theists, Deists deny that there is a personal God who has revealed himself and is active in the world through his providential guidance.

4. Theodore G. Tappert, *The Notebook of a Colonial Clergyman: Condensed from the Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975), 195.

5. Peter A. Lillback, *George Washington’s Sacred Fire* (Jacksonville, FL: Providence Forum Press, 2006).

6. Washington, “General Orders, 2 May 1778,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-15-02-0016>.

7. “From George Washington to The States,” 8 June 1783, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-11404>.

8. Micah 6:8 (KJV): “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

9. George Washington, “Undelivered First Inaugural Address: Fragments,” 30 April 1789, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-02-02-0130-0002> (original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 2, *1 April 1789–15 June 1789*, ed. Dorothy Twohig, Presidential Series [Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987], 158–73).

10. Deists did not believe in revealed religion or in the idea of inherent human depravity—“original sin.” They rejected the idea of revelation as a source of divine knowledge and replaced it with human reason.

11. George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796, Letterbook 24, April 3, 1793–March 3, 1797, George Washington Papers, Series 2: Letterbooks, 1754–1799, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mgw2.024/>.

12. Washington did not support governmental coercion of religion, and thus cannot be considered a Christian nationalist (to use a modern term). In a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette dated August 15, 1787, Washington wrote: “Being no bigot myself to any mode of worship, I am disposed to indulge the professors of Christianity in the church, that road to Heaven, which to them shall seem the most direct plainest easiest and least liable to exception.” *WGW* 29, 259—1787. Also see Samuel W. Calhoun, “Getting the Framers Wrong: A Response to Professor Geoffrey Stone,” *UCLA Law Review Discourse* 57, no. 1 (2009): 1–14.

13. Thomas Jefferson, “Jefferson’s Letter to the Danbury Baptists: The Final Letter, as Sent,” January 1, 1802, *Information Bulletin* 57, no. 6 (June 1998), Library of Congress, Washington, DC, <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>.

## *Abbreviations*

- GWR Paul F. Boller Jr., *George Washington and Religion* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963)
- PGW George Washington and Dorothy Twohig, *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, 21 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987–2020)
- WGW John Clement Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington, from the Original Manuscript Sources 1749–1799*, 39 vols. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1931–44)

PART 1

*The Controversy*

# 1

## *The Controversy*

*“Broadly speaking, of course, Washington can be classified as a Deist.”*

Paul F. Boller Jr., 1963<sup>1</sup>

*“On my honor and the faith of a Christian.”*

George Washington, 1763<sup>2</sup>

“A luke-warm Episcopalian,”<sup>3</sup> a “warm Deist,”<sup>4</sup> “never a deeply religious man, at least in the tradition Christian sense of the term,”<sup>5</sup> “not particularly ardent in his faith,”<sup>6</sup> “and he avoided referring to Christianity.”<sup>7</sup> No wonder Professor Paul Boller wrote, “Broadly speaking, of course, Washington can be classified as a Deist.” Yet paradoxically, this was the man who stood trembling before his new nation to give his First Inaugural Address<sup>8</sup> and spoke of “the sacred fire of liberty.”<sup>9</sup> This was not a secular fire; it was a flame fueled by the holy.

This is surprising perhaps, but as we will see, Washington’s description of himself repeatedly used the words “ardent,” “fervent,” “pious,” and “devout.” There are over one hundred different prayers composed and written by Washington in his own hand. When his Church vestry considered not honoring his purchase of a family pew in his local church, his passions flared in a letter. He described himself as one of the deepest men of faith of his day when he confessed to a clergyman, “No Man has a more perfect Reliance on the alwise, and powerful dispensations of the Supreme Being than I have nor thinks his aid more necessary.”<sup>10</sup>

Rather than avoid the word “God,” on the very first national Thanksgiving under the U.S. Constitution, he said, “It is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor.”<sup>11</sup> Although he never once used the word “Deist” in his voluminous writings, he often mentioned religion, Christianity, and the Gospel. He spoke of Christ as “the divine Author of our blessed religion.” He encouraged missionaries who were seeking to “Christianize” the “aboriginals.” He wrote of “the blessed religion revealed in the Word of God.” He encouraged seekers to learn “the religion of Jesus Christ.” He even said to his soldiers, “To the distinguished Character of Patriot, it should be our highest Glory to add the more distinguished Character of Christian.” Not bad for a “luke-warm” Episcopalian!

Washington is known by Americans as the founding father of our nation. However, there has been great confusion and debate about his faith. The historic view was that he was a Christian. The consensus of scholars that has developed since the bicentennial of Washington’s birth in 1932 is that he was actually a Deist, that is, one who believes in a very remote and impersonal God. (We will define this term more fully in the following chapter.)

Who is correct—the recent historians or Washington himself? Our purpose is to answer the question of Washington’s religion using Washington’s own words. Was he a Christian or a Deist?<sup>12</sup> We believe, when all the evidence is considered, it is clear that Washington was a Christian.

One proof of the significance of George Washington in American history is that we read into him what we want to see. To a secularist, Washington was a secularist. To a Christian, Washington was a church-going believer. It is natural that people want to make Washington in their own image, even to a humorous degree. For example, George Washington wearing a baseball cap graced the front page of *USA Today* some years ago in reference to Washington, DC’s getting its own baseball team.

Everybody wants to claim Washington. Christians want to make him a devout evangelical. Skeptics want to make him a skeptic. The truth, however, is that he was an eighteenth-century Anglican, an orthodox, Trinity-affirming believer in Jesus Christ, who also affirmed the historic

Christian Gospel of a Savior who died for sinners and was raised to life. But it would not be accurate to call him an “evangelical” (by modern standards of the word).

The importance of this study is more than historical. Establishing that Washington was a Christian helps to substantiate the critical role that Christians and Christian principles played in the founding of our nation. This, in turn, encourages a careful reappraisal of our history and founding documents. A nation that forgets its past does not know where it is or where it is headed. Such a study would also empower, enable, and defend the presence of a strong Judeo-Christian worldview in the ongoing development of our state and national governments and courts. It provides the necessary foundation for an honest assessment of the faith and values of our founders and the government they instituted.

### **No Longer a Hero?**

Can an historic national hero become irrelevant? This seems to have happened to Washington and many other “politically incorrect” founding fathers, at least with some leading educators. In fact, many of our founders—despite all their sacrifices to establish our great country with unparalleled freedoms—have been denigrated as the irrelevant history of “dead white men.” The *Washington Times* reported, “George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin are not included in the revised version of the New Jersey Department of Education history standards, a move some critics view as political correctness at its worst.”<sup>13</sup>

The impact of this approach can be seen in a Washington College Poll. It found that more Americans had a higher respect for Bill Clinton’s job performance as the nation’s forty-second president than they did George Washington’s.<sup>14</sup>

### **No Longer a Christian?**

Pick up most books and articles on Washington from 1932 or earlier, and with few exceptions you will read about George Washington the

Christian. That began to change with the iconoclastic scholarship of the mid-twentieth century. The leading modern study is by historian Paul F. Boller Jr.<sup>15</sup> His conclusion: to the “unbiased observer” Washington appears as a Deist, not a devout Christian.<sup>16</sup>

While there had been studies before Boller’s, his is now considered the definitive standard book on the subject.<sup>17</sup> Afterward, very few *scholars* asserted that Washington was a Christian. Consequently, it has become the accepted “fact” of history that Washington was a Deist. Boller’s book, to our knowledge, has never been fully rebutted. Using historical scholarship, we address Boller’s arguments and go beyond them in a way accessible to all readers.

Boller admits that religion was important to Washington as a leader. He writes, “. . . he saw to it that divine services were performed by the chaplains as regularly as possible on the Sabbath for the soldiers under his command.”<sup>18</sup> Boller even admits there are testimonials of Washington’s consistency in attending church: “John C. Fitzpatrick’s summation of Washington’s church-going habits (which he examined carefully) seems fair enough: ‘Washington. . . was a consistent, if not always regular church-goer.’”<sup>19</sup> Later writers have asserted that Washington did not even attend church as a mature adult.<sup>20</sup>

The erosion of accurate historicity is disconcerting. What will the next generation of scholars claim? This ignorance of the facts requires us to interact with Washington’s own written words and the unquestionable records of his actions.

A “tongue-in-cheek” book on Washington claims to be based on nothing but the facts, but is unsubstantiated. Marvin Kitman describes a busy few days when Washington attended various churches:

And here was a man who didn’t even believe in God, some of his political enemies said, paraphrasing his own minister, who had been complaining about the way Washington never mentioned the word *God*—he did use *Providence* regularly—didn’t come to take sacrament, or do this or that. He was big with the Deist vote, however.<sup>21</sup>

Kitman is incorrect on many fronts. Washington did believe in God and referred to God hundreds of times (by many names intended to honor Him). There are written records that Washington partook of Christian communion both before and after the War. Furthermore, the alleged “Deist vote” would have been quite marginal at best. Benjamin Hart notes that at the beginning of the American Revolution, 98.4% of the Americans claimed to be Protestant; 1.4% claimed to be Roman Catholic—thus, 99.8% were professing Christians. This corroborates Benjamin Franklin’s observation on his contemporary fellow Americans in the midst of Washington’s presidency:

The almost general mediocrity of fortune that prevails in America obliging its people to follow some business for subsistence, those vices that arise usually from idleness are in great measure prevented. Industry and constant employment are great preservatives of the morals and virtue of a nation. Hence bad examples to youth are more rare in America. . . . To this may be truly added, that serious religion, under its various denominations, is not only tolerated, but respected and practiced. Atheism is unknown there, infidelity rare and secret; so that persons may live to a great age in that country without having their piety shocked by meeting with either an atheist or an infidel.<sup>22</sup>

### **A Devout Eighteenth-Century Anglican**

An honest look at the facts shows that Washington was a devout eighteenth-century Anglican. He believed the orthodox Trinitarian faith that proclaimed the substitutionary saving death of Jesus Christ for sinners. Even if, as some have declared, he stopped attending communion during the War, does this prove he was not a believing Christian?

Could other reasons better explain it? Could it have been because he had broken communion with the head of the Anglican Church (King George III)? Perhaps during the stresses of the War, he got out of the habit of receiving the Lord’s Table on a regular basis. And what of the historical testimonies that he did attend communion after the War from time to time?

As we analyze the written evidence from Washington himself, we find that he had an exemplary private prayer life. His biblical literacy suggests he read the Scriptures regularly, and he used the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* from the Church of England, a very orthodox guide for Christian worship of the Trinity. In fact, the *Book of Common Prayer* is more theologically sound than the average book available in a Christian bookstore today.

In this present book, we are taking what Christian philosopher Gary Habermas, in another context, calls “the minimalist facts approach.” We are only going to say what can be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. We are not going to present a hagiography of Washington; we will not make him into an ecclesiastical saint.

Washington was not a perfect man: He occasionally lost his temper; he drank wine—maybe even too much when he was a young man.<sup>23</sup> He was involved with activities that some might fault: he had a revenue-producing distillery on his Mount Vernon Estate;<sup>24</sup> he loved to fox hunt; he went to the theater and occasionally to the horse races. And he owned slaves, something all Americans today find immoral but that was not uncommon for a Southern gentleman of his day.

Like others, he struggled with personal challenges such as illness, fatigue, pain, deaths of loved ones, loneliness, financial pressures, and parenting challenges. Yet he attempted to walk according to the duties of the Christian faith. He wrote to his lifelong friend, the Rev. Bryan Fairfax (Lord Fairfax), who had been pastor of Washington’s church in Alexandria, Virginia. Writing from Mount Vernon only months before he died, Washington looked back over his very full life and described his spiritual walk:

The favourable sentiments which others, you say, have been pleased to express respecting me, cannot but be pleasing to a mind who always walked on a straight line, and endeavoured as far as human frailties, and perhaps strong passions, would enable him, to discharge the relative duties to his Maker and fellow-men, without seeking any indirect or left handed attempts to acquire popularity.<sup>25</sup>

Washington was a land surveyor by training who specialized in setting long, straight boundary lines. As he surveys his remarkable life, he says had sought to walk a “straight line” in discharging his duties to his “Maker and fellow-men.” He openly spoke of his own “fervent prayer” to his soldiers. Consider this concluding line of a private letter Washington wrote to his then faithful officer, Benedict Arnold:

. . . give him all the Assistance in your Power, to finish the glorious  
Work you have begun. That the Almighty may preserve and  
prosper you in it, is the sincere and fervent  
Prayer of, Dear Sir,

Your Humble & Obedient Servant,  
George Washington.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, he often expresses his own deep faith in God’s Providence with heartfelt language as in a letter to his close friend in Boston, the Rev. William Gordon. Referring to God’s “many other signal Interpositions of Providence,” he declares that they “must serve to inspire every reflecting Mind with Confidence.” And then he describes his own spiritual commitment:

No Man has a more perfect Reliance on the all-wise, and powerful  
dispensations of the Supreme Being than I have nor thinks his aid  
more necessary.<sup>27</sup>

### **Disestablishment in Virginia**

It is true that Virginia had an established church—the Anglican Church. By law, one was required to attend services and pay tithes as a colonist in Virginia. However, that changed in 1786 with the Act for Establishing Religious Liberty. This great step forward in terms of religious liberty was especially the work of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

One of the key arguments Jefferson made was that Almighty God has made the mind free and that any punishments men mete out against

religious opinion deemed to be false are a departure from “the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being lord both of body and mind, yet choose [sic] not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, but to exalt it by its influence on reason alone.”<sup>28</sup>

In other words, Jesus Christ could have forced men to believe in him, but did not, and instead gave us the personal responsibility to believe. Who are we as mere men to punish others for their religious opinions, no matter how wrong these opinions may be? Secularists sometimes interpret Jefferson’s argument here as a plea for unbelief. Not so. He argues for religious freedom. In fact, religious liberty in America especially stems from two great Christian clergymen who prepared the way—Roger Williams and William Penn.

After Virginia disestablished the Anglican Church, men and women were no longer required by state law to worship there. But Washington did not stop attending church after disestablishment. He kept attending his church long after that—until he died.

### **God in Washington’s Speeches and Writings**

Washington mentions God in his private letters as well as his public speeches and writings frequently and employed a vast variety of terms for the Almighty including, “the great disposer of events,” “the invisible hand,” “Jehovah,” or his favorite term — “Providence.” Washington either truly cared about God, or he employed God-talk for mere political or manipulative ends, while he himself didn’t believe the words he was speaking. The latter appears difficult to accept from a man who insisted, “Honesty is the best policy.”

Boller quotes a nineteenth-century Anglican minister Bird Wilson, who laments that Washington allegedly never mentioned Jesus: “I have diligently perused every line that Washington ever gave to the public, and I do not find one expression in which he pledges himself as a professor of Christianity.”<sup>29</sup> Here is a sampling of what Wilson could have perused: Washington said that America will only be happy if we imitate “the divine author of our blessed religion,”<sup>30</sup> referring to Jesus Christ. This was not

from an obscure letter; it is the climax of a critical farewell letter the Commander-in-Chief wrote to the governors of all the states at the end of the War. General Washington wrote to the Delaware Indian chiefs, who asked for advice on teaching their young ones, that they would do well to learn our way of life and arts, “but above all, the religion of Jesus Christ.”<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, Washington talks about the need to be a good Christian—using the word “Christian”—in several different letters and communiqués: “A Christian Spirit,” “A True Christian,” “Be more of a man and a Christian,” “Christian soldiers,” “The little Christian,” and “To the distinguished character of Patriot, it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished character of Christian.”<sup>32</sup>

Washington held deeply that strong leadership must be coupled with consistency and integrity. One of his “Rules of Civility” comes into play here.<sup>33</sup> The 48th says, “Wherein you reprove another be unblameable yourself, for example is more prevalent than precepts.” Thus he wrote to Lord Stirling on March 5, 1780, “Example, whether it be good or bad, has a powerful influence, and the higher in Rank the officer is, who sets it, the more striking it is.” He wrote to James Madison on March 31, 1787, “Laws or ordinances unobserved, or partially attended to, had better never have been made; because the first is a mere nihil [utterly useless], and the second is productive of much jealousy and discontent.” He also wrote to Col. William Woodford on November 10, 1775, “Impress upon the mind of every man, from the first to the lowest, the importance of the cause, and what it is they are contending for.” And writing to James McHenry, he declared,

A good choice [of General Staff] is of . . . immense consequence. . . . [They] ought to be men of the most respectable character, and of first-rate abilities; because, from the nature of their respective offices, and from their being always about the Commander-in-Chief, who is obliged to entrust many things to them *confidentially*, scarcely any movement can take place without their knowledge. . . . Besides possessing the qualifications just mentioned, they ought to have those of Integrity and prudence in an eminent degree, that *entire* confidence might be reposed in them. Without these, and their being on good

terms with the Commanding General, his measures, if not designedly thwarted, may be so embarrassed as to make them move heavily on.<sup>34</sup>

Washington believed a leader's actions and integrity must illustrate his own commitment to his commands; a successful leader must lead by example. Washington could not have called on his men to be such authentic Christians if he was not trying to be such as well. Bird Wilson did not search thoroughly enough for Washington's Christianity in his writings. Additionally, if you read the prayers in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* that Washington and his fellow worshipers read regularly in the weekly worship services, you repeatedly see the exaltation of Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

We believe that modern skeptics have read their own unbelief into Washington, just as many Christians have read too much piety into the man. The skeptics, however, are on even shakier ground than the pietists Boller ridicules for their uncritical reliance on unsubstantiated anecdotes and stories that turn Washington into a paragon of devotional piety. The skeptics have remade Washington into their own unbelieving image—even though:

- He was clearly and deeply biblically literate.
- He was a committed churchman.
- There are numerous accounts from family and military associates—too numerous to be dismissed—of people coming across Washington in earnest, private prayer.
- He repeatedly encouraged piety, public and private; he insisted on chaplains for the military and legislature; he often promoted “religion and morality” and recognized these as essential for our national happiness, and even called on the nation's leaders to follow Christ's example.
- He turned away from the opportunity to become a king, even though men wanted to make him that after he won the war. Indeed,

Washington is a striking model of what Christians have called a servant-statesman.

These and many other indicators show that recent scholars have been misreading George Washington and ignoring the spiritual realities of our founding father. By so doing, they have presented a very truncated picture of “his Excellency.”

This book intends to convince you that when all the available evidence is considered, the only viable conclusion is that George Washington was a Christian and not a Deist. What enflamed Washington’s passion and stirred his heart was that which was sacred to his soul—his utter dependence on the hand of Divine Providence.

His passion is important for us as well. Where a nation begins influences its destiny. Is the Judeo-Christian heritage of America a reality or an interloper aimed at suppressing the secularism of the founders? Or are today’s secularists trying to recreate our founding father into a Deist in order to rid our nation of Washington’s holy flame of faith? Was it a secular flame or a “sacred fire” that Washington ignited to light the lamp for America’s future? Throughout the rest of this book, we will carefully consider his words. And as we do, we believe that these words will fuel the “sacred fire of liberty” and continue to illumine the path of America’s future.

## Chapter 1 Endnotes

1. GWR, 93.
2. John Clement Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington, from the Original Manuscript Sources 1749–1799*, 39 vols. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1931–44). George Washington's writings are available online at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/washington/>. Readers may find quotations by searching by word, date, or recipient.
3. Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2004), 45.
4. <https://academic.oup.com/book/36089/chapter-abstract/313353270>. Cf. Franklin Steiner, *The Religious Beliefs of Our Presidents from Washington to FDR* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995).
5. Ellis, *His Excellency*, 269. Cf. Willard Sterne Randall, *George Washington: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1997).
6. Ellis, *His Excellency*, 151. Cf. Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography*, 7 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948).
7. Chernow describes Washington's religion by stating, "This is one of the rare times that Washington referred to Christianity rather than Providence." In Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2010), 294. Cf. James T. Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (New York: Signet, 1984).
8. William Maclay, *The Journal of William Maclay, United State Senator from Pennsylvania 1789–1791* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1927), 9.
9. WGW, Inaugural Address.
10. WGW 37, 5–13–1776.
11. WGW 30, 10–3–1789.
12. The eighteenth century in America was a remarkable time. This is not simply because of the political and international events surrounding the birth of our nation, but also because many aspects of the modern world emerged from this period. One of the most important ingredients of the modern world is the elevation of human reason above scriptural revelation. In the 1700s this was beginning to take place among many of the educated. The movement during that time was called "the Enlightenment." One of the central components of the Enlightenment era was a shift from biblical Christianity to a theological viewpoint called "Deism."

Deism in Washington's day rejected divine revelation, affirmed the pre-eminence of human reason, but had not yet necessarily denied the validity of Providence. Washington did believe in the Providence of God in the affairs of human history. Later Deism may well have rejected this idea, but such was not the case in colonial America. In the next chapter we make a distinction between "hard" and "soft" Deism.

13. Ellen Sorokin, "No Founding Fathers? That's Our New History," *Washington Times*, January 28, 2002.

14. Brit Hume, "The Political Grapevine," February 22, 2005, *Fox News*.

15. *GWR*.

16. *GWR*, 86.

17. See for example Frank E. Grizzard Jr., *George Washington: A Biographical Companion* (Denver; ABC-CLIO, 2002), 268–73. The only scholarly source that Grizzard cites is Boller's.

18. *GWR*, 30.

19. *GWR*, 30.

20. See Flexner quote in note 1 above.

21. Marvin Kitman, *The Making of the President 1789: The Unauthorized Campaign Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 73.

22. Benjamin Franklin, *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America* (London: M. Gurney, 1794), 22–23.

23. John Corbin, *The Unknown Washington* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), 36, writes, "Having ordered a drink at the bar of a tavern in what is now Martinsburg, West Virginia, [Washington] found that he had no money and tendered a coonskin. The change came in rabbitskins, said to have numbered one hundred and fifty-eight. Confronted by this unwieldy heap, and possibly warmed by his liquor, Washington stood treat to all comers until the last rabbit-scut disappeared behind the bar. An eighteenth-century diarist quotes Alexander Hamilton to the effect that Washington had a strong head for liquor—and exercised it daily." *WGW* 33, 10–9–1794, note.

24. *WGW* 36, 1–10–1798.

25. *WGW* 37, 1–20–1799.

26. *WGW* 4, 12–5–1775.

27. *WGW* 37, 5–13–1776.

28. Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," 1786, Bruce Frohnen, ed., *The American Republic: Primary Sources* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2002), 330.

29. *GWR*, 16.

30. John Rhodehamel, ed., *George Washington: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 526.

31. Rhodehamel, *George Washington*, 351.

32. All of these quotes can be found in *WGW* 11, 343.

33. *The Rules of Civility* was a collection of 110 maxims for behavior for a young man. We will consider these rules in the chapter on Washington's childhood education.

34. *WGW* 36, 7-4-1798.