

FORGING HISTORY

William S. Warner

I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie.¹
George Washington

Needless to say, if the British Army had captured George Washington, we wouldn't be celebrating Presidents' Day. So, why say it? Consider this portent: Osama bin Laden has not been captured. To put that angst in historical perspective, consider this probability: if Washington had been captured, he would have been brought to London, tried, found guilty of treason, ordered executed, and then drawn and quartered.² His name would have been a mere footnote in British history, his birthday forgotten if ever remembered. But he wasn't caught; he survived. America survived, with Washington at the helm, and as they say, the rest is history. Or is it?

The American Revolution was a longer, far more arduous, and more painful struggle than later generations would understand.³ And Washington changed history more than most today sufficiently appreciate. Far more troubled and flawed than many realize, he was a bifurcated enigma of greatness and failure. When historians fix their gaze from a distance and write warts-and-all biographies they often offend people who cherish what they remember as a more coherent, worshipful and supposedly more annealing rendition of the past. Revolutionary issues about Indians, scandals about slaves, and myths about minutemen have been, until recently, forgotten. Fortunately, antidotes for historical amnesia abound in today's history books⁴.

The objective of what follows is not to denigrate, disparage or decry the likes of Washington, but to suggest the future might extol, enthrone and eulogize the likes of bin Laden. Looking towards the future, one wonders what historians might *forge*, in both senses of the word, from today's firebrands. Over the next century or two, we might find historians hammering out the most unlikely heroes; performing cosmetic surgery to today's wart-covered terrorists, giving them complexions as smooth as bin Laden's skin, with inevitably determined futures as clear as his doleful eyes. Historical inevitably is a winner's story, excusing mistakes of the past and relegating a loser's story to footnotes, like Washington's failures and Cornwallis's successes.

Two hundred and fifty years ago George Washington, then a young British officer, complained, as he would throughout his career, that he had been given responsibilities without resources to meet them. The twenty-three year old was

¹ *Oxford Dictionary of Thematic Quotations*. Oxford University Press. p. 223. 2000.

² Specifically, each arm and leg would have been tied to a horse; then the four horses would have been simultaneously whipped, pulling in the cardinal directions.

³ The Revolution lasted nearly eight years. By the time it ended, it had taken the lives of 25,000 Americans, or roughly one percent of the population. In percentage of lives lost, it was the most costly war in American history, except for the Civil War.

⁴ An excellent example is G.B. Nash. *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America*. 2005. Viking

commanding the newly created Virginia Regiment in the French and Indian War.⁵ The initiative, the numbers, and the tactical advantage were on the enemy's side: "No troops in the universe can guard against the cunning and wiles of Indians," he explained: "No one can tell where they will fall, 'till the mischief is done, and then 'tis vain to pursue."⁶ Washington's words from the wilderness of the Ohio Country echo today in Afghanistan and Iraq, from commanders responsible for providing security over regions inherently indefensible – the epitome of mission impossible.

That same year, 1756, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born. Though his doubts and defeats are mostly forgotten (if hardly remembered), he remains, like Washington, a worldwide celebrity. And for good reason: both changed the world for the better. Neither ever faded from the limelight, though at times scholars have cast shadows over Washington owning 350 slaves and Mozart being a foulmouthed brat with a fondness for off-color practical jokes. But over the past decade both have received new notoriety. At a time when wealthy white men are pariahs in history, Europeans are lavishly celebrating Mozart's 250 anniversary, and Americans in great numbers are rediscovering their Founding Fathers in best-selling books (e.g., David McCullough's *John Adams and 1776* and Joseph Ellis's *Founding Brothers* and *His Excellency George Washington*.)

The renewed interest in our nation's fledgling years, and those who gave it flight, might be linked to our current war for democracy (read, war on terror). Which is why virulent terrorists, and, in particular, Osama bin Laden, hold promise for the forge of future historians. A future nexus between minutemen and al-Qaeda is a controversial weld at best; casting bin Laden as a Washington is a forgery at worst. But there are potential deposits for future historians to mine. Buried deep in the mountain of history rest the strangest treasures of greatness – and the greatest treasures of strangeness.

Washington and Mozart, like many powdered-wig icons of the West, share epithets of prominence and epitaphs of praise. Their enigmas, however, were their own. And their psyches remain as hidden and elusive as Osama bin Laden. In a word, they were odd, and their oddness survives as much as their stature.

If there were any explanation to the survival of Washington's stature, it would be the same as why he rose to such stature to begin with: he survived. (The same might be said of bin Laden, if he survives.) Washington lost more battles than he won – in fact he lost more battles than any surviving general in American history. He was not as wise as Franklin, nor as well educated as Adams or Jefferson, or as bright as Hamilton, or as politically savvy as Madison.⁷ Yet, he was *primus inter pares*.⁸ In today's words, he was "the man".

It makes one dizzy just trying to understand Washington: he reluctantly took command yet demanded authority; he worshipped liberty but owned slaves; he was sangfroid yet exhibited elan. His greatness sprouted myths (like felling the cherry tree), and apocryphal stories about his wooden teeth bite into our imaginations. Just imagine the father of a country being, most unlikely, sterile. Most likely, Washington was.

Britain could have won the war, more than once, had the commanding officers pursued Washington's defeated troops. Instead, they assumed the upper hand: they let the

⁵ Also called the Seven Years' War, which was actually closer to nine years (1754-1763).

⁶ J. Ellis. *His Excellency George Washington*. 2004. Random House. P.25

⁷ J. Ellis. *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*. 2002. Random House.

⁸ L. "first among equals".

insurgents slip back to the woods to continue to disintegrate and decay. They thought it was just a matter of time. They thought it was inevitable. Yet as we know, the spoils of inevitability go to the winners of war; those with 20-20 hindsight who write remembered history, which is not the same as experienced history. The mythological rendition of dedicated citizen-soldiers united for eight years in the fight for inevitable American liberty was, in fact, a romantic fiction designed by later generations to conceal the deep divisions and widespread apathy in the patriot camp.⁹ And one of our greatest myths was Washington's victory at Yorktown.

Cornwallis and Yorktown are twin words that slash like a sword, with Washington holding the handle. Actually, Yorktown was a tactical victory by French sappers, in spite of, not because, of Washington. The true victory of Washington was his reluctant resignation to use unorthodox and ignoble insurgent tactics of guerrilla warfare. Less out of conviction than a realistic recognition of his limited resources, Washington came to accept the fact that he must adopt a more defensive strategy. A "Fabian strategy" named after a Roman general Fabius Cunctator, who defeated the Carthaginians by withdrawing whenever his army's fate was at risk. It was a shift in thinking that did not come naturally to Washington, because this strategy, like today's terrorist strategies, was the preferred approach of the weak. And weakness was an anathema to Washington. In effect, he had no choice but to become an American Fabius, or simply surrender.¹⁰

Who would have guessed that Washington's ragtag citizenry would defeat the most powerful and efficient machine for waging war in the world? Britain was fully capable of projecting and sustaining its power almost indefinitely. Soldiers trained and disciplined from battle-hardened European wars, commanded by the best officers of the day, supported by the world's finest navy, financed with a bottomless war chest. With a history of failure, Washington faced a future armada of 200 warships, 400 transport ships, and 30,000 well-armed troops. The desertion rate of colonists was high; the supply of arms was low; the training nonexistent, and promised salaries more hopeless than hopeful. After seven years of chronic defeat, his future didn't look promising, especially with traitors selling out friendship as well as ideals. Only a fool would have bet on Washington winning the war.

Only a bigger fool would have bet that the colonies could survive as a nation. There was no government to speak of, only a loose confederation of articles, most of self-interest, all of them unenforceable. Imagine what the European monarchs thought of this nation-building experiment. Democracy had been tried twice before (in Greece and Rome), albeit limited, but in both cases it was short-term (read, failure). It was just a matter of time before this political experiment failed, or so many thought. But that was not the first time those with assumed power had thought wrong – nor the last.

The arrogance of British power strikes a chord that is painfully familiar to America. Not just in its past commitment in Southeast Asia, but also in its current commitment in the Near East. The salient point is that America's engagement echoes Britain's: a deeply felt conviction by George Bush's administration, like George III's ministries, that the future is at stake. Like a gilded mirror reflecting the thoughts of eighteenth century Britain, this conviction will probably continue to animate the highest

⁹ G.B. Nash. *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America*. 2005. Viking.

¹⁰ op cit.

echelons of government long after public opinion grows weary of the war. And as was the case in the American Revolution, even after a succession of battlefield setbacks demonstrates that the war is not winnable in any traditional sense of the term.

Only future history books will tell the outcome of the war on terror, and cast bin Laden as a fiend or a Fabius. The winner shall inevitably declare the inevitable outcome, but the winner is not inevitable. Having said that, it takes little imagination to envisage a future history book that might read as follows:

The perennial belief harbored by both sides of most wars is that the conflict will be short. As in the American Revolution, time was on the insurgents' side. But no one in 2001, like in 1776, fully appreciated how long the American administrations, like the British ministries, were prepared to stay the course; or how quickly the Jihad's fires would subside, and in several countries of the Near East, like in several American colonies, nearly die out completely. Though bin Laden, like Washington, never wavered, public enthusiasm for war faded alongside the evanescent illusion that it would be brief. The seductive illusion came to a quick end. Both the Revolution and the Jihad were recipes for a protracted war.

In this imaginative history book, shots fired by Washington's muskets echoed in bin Laden's AK-47s. The Jihad's "founding fathers" were a band of bellicose hotheads, each deeply flawed but gifted with faith, like America's own were. The Taliban was the Green Mountain Boys in not so green mountains. Our "9/11" was their "shot heard around the world"; the USS Cole was their Boston Tea Party; car bombings in Kabul and Baghdad were re-tread marches across Concord Bridge and Lexington. Although their freedom fighters (terrorists), forming militias (cells), were rank amateurs, they took on the most powerful, well-trained and heavily financed army and navy in the world. And they won, eventually. In other words, the war on terror lost, inevitably. Osama bin Laden became the father of a confederation, then a nation, which after two hundred years became an empire.

More eerie similarities: In the 1980's, Afghanistan was the theater for bin Laden's French and Indian War,¹¹ an eerie play on an eerie stage with eerie familiar actors. A modern-day war in a primitive wilderness, with American-supported mujahedin playing the role of British-supported colonists and Russia in French costume. That's where the protagonist Washington is played by the agonist bin Laden. He cuts his teeth in war and learns how to fight, the hard way, by failure. But he also learns how to win (Fabius style), hitting and running, then hiding. It will be a useful lesson when the actors change role in Act 2. The characters, however, remain the same.

Act 2: bin Laden's war is truly revolutionary. The stage is not only much broader than as it was 230 years ago – the theater of war covers the world – the tragedy of war and politics takes on new meaning. War is no longer an extension of politics; politics is an extension of war (against unbelievers). But like the American Revolution, only a minority supports the Jihad. About a third are loyal to the status quo, another third remain indifferent. Likewise, it lasts nearly a decade. Most unexpectedly, rival countries with

¹¹ Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to prevent their Afghan clients from being overthrown, but rebel resistance to both the Marxist government and Soviet presence continued for about the same length of time as the French and Indian War.

long-standing animosity unite – despite minority support. America does not expect Iraq and Iran to join arms (in the broadest sense of the word) any more than Britain expected Vermont and Virginia. Differences about Islam, like difference about slavery, are dwarfed by a towering enemy – infidels of Islam.

Bin Laden, like Washington, wants a standing army, but by default he must rely on ad-hoc militias. The ‘freedom fighters’ are young men, mostly poor, and mostly dirty, though for many their brains have been washed if not dry-cleaned in ideals. Despite the apocryphal stories, neither commander thinks much of the militias as dependable forces. For good reason: the peripatetic fighters come and go like grains of sand blowing across the desert. They come from neighboring lands: Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt, Afghanistan, Palestine, Oman, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. (Is that thirteen?) Ironically, although bin Laden’s homeland of Saudi Arabia, like Washington’s Virginia, is the richest (supplying the best men and most money) it, too, is basically absent from the war – except at the very end. Likewise, after years of war, bin Laden’s Yorktown comes when his army and economy are in disarray. As if a spirited but overmatched boxer, reeling and about to collapse from exhaustion, steps forward in the final round to deliver a knockout punch.

There are more similarities. Bin Laden, like Washington, is one of the richest men from the richest land. He nobly surrenders his salary and personally finances the war effort. He, like Washington, is blessed with personal qualities that count most in protracted war: composed, indefatigable, and able to learn from his mistakes. He, like Washington, is a survivor. During the American Revolution the British would change commanding general four times; Washington was forever. History repeats itself for bin Laden. Equally important, bin Laden, like Washington, is convinced that he is on the side of destiny – or, in more arrogant moments, sure that destiny is on his side. Even bin Laden’s critics, like Washington’s, acknowledge that he can not be bribed, corrupted or compromised.

Despite all of their mistakes, events seem to align themselves with their own instincts. Both begin war determined to deliver a decisive blow against a more powerful, battle-tested army. They end doing just that – with the aid of an ally. In between both spend the entire war in the field with the army. At Valley Forge and Tora Bora they lick their wounds in remote isolation. Neither commander is, by any standard, a military genius. The myths that surround them, however, claim otherwise.

This imaginary history book dispels the myths, or at least some of them (no history book dispels them all). Washington didn’t always tell the truth; bin Laden didn’t always lie (and Hussein sometimes knew the difference). Neither “founding father” gave birth to a new nation, but both did germinate seminal ideas conceived centuries before their resurrection: Washington’s revolution of independence for democracy, and bin Laden’s revelation of Islam for theocracy. It is important to remember that revolution and revelation are not synonymous. Revolution signifies a drastic change; revelation signifies a new, inspired view. In bin Laden’s case, inspired terror of biblical proportion.

Theocracy, like democracy, appealed to the masses, and as a result, propagated myths about God, freedom, and the citizen-soldiers who fought for the cause. Both al-Qaeda and the minutemen fought the “glorious cause”, but primarily in the beginning of the conflict. Each year, fewer and fewer people wanted anything to do with the Continental service or al-Qaeda. Most of these citizen-soldiers were foreign born,

downright desperate folk with pinched lives; many recently released from jail.¹² Desertion was the bane of the commanders-in-chief.¹³ And surprisingly, most of the indigenous tribal folk did not fight with these citizen-soldiers, rather, *against* them. Not surprisingly, the enslaved did likewise.¹⁴

Conspiracy theories are ignored; parallel facts are not. The nexus between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein was no more real than between Washington and Napoleon. Though, in both cases they shared a common enemy (America and Britain, respectively). Admittedly, Hussein and Bonaparte were tyrants with dreams of expansive domination; and the dreams of Washington and bin Laden went further than either imagined. But Washington's revolutionary dream rippled across the Atlantic, washing hopeful liberty on foreign shores. Bin Laden's revelations blew across the sands of the Near East – its grains of terror scouring every polished surface of the civilized world. The commitment to war by both leaders changed the world far more than later generations would realize. Washington's commitment led to a general global state of constitutional democracy; bin Laden's commitment led to a general global state of war.

Some might say that a book paralleling Washington with bin Laden would be at best iconoclastic, at worst treason. How could one balance noble with ignoble, virtue with violence, probity with perfidy, self-sacrifice with human sacrifice? The answer returns to the spoils of war – the writing of history – which always go to the winner. If bin Laden survives, future pages of the present war (like present pages of past wars) will herald the inevitable victory of a better ideology and, as a result, a better life. The death and destruction left behind will be mere footnotes, overlooked and quickly forgotten.

Slaughter of innocent people is abhorrent. So is slavery. Both go against the grain of decent human behavior. And yet, they are explained – and too often excused – in history. Voices that justify terrorism are stench in the ear, especially for Americans still smoldering from 9/11. Justifying slavery would have been as acrid to Washington's slaves. In both cases, the response is a matter of timing. In the present we react (without thinking); in the future we reflect (with deliberate thought). Regardless, it's a time when history stops being theoretical and musty and becomes personal and malodorous.

Yet, even today, Washington is credited as being magnanimous towards slavery: he refused, on moral grounds, to sell slaves that would break up a family; and of the nine Presidents who owned slaves, only Washington freed his (near the end of his life).¹⁵ One of America's most popular contemporary historians, Stephen Ambrose, wrote (near the end of his life):

¹² The majority of minutemen were foreign born, and most of them had only recently arrived in North America. Fortuitously for middle-state recruiters, about 127,000 immigrants had poured into the colonies between 1760 and 1775. Most hailed from Scotland, Ireland and England, but about 20,000 came from Germany (G.B. Nash. *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America*. 2005. Viking, p. 219-220).

¹³ More than four out of every ten New Jersey troops in 1777 deserted. In New York, about one third of the privates deserted. Even in Washington's handpicked Life Guard, eight soldiers deserted during the war (ibid. p. 223).

¹⁴ Like most African Americans, including Washington's slave Harry Washington, the majority of some 200,000 Native Americans, composing eighty-five nations east of the Mississippi, fought against the side that proclaimed the equality of all men (ibid. p. 247-263).

¹⁵ George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, James Polk, and Franklin Pierce.

‘Slavery and discrimination darken our hearts and cloud our minds in the most extraordinary ways, including the blanket judgment today against Americans who were slave owners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That the masters should be judged as lacking in the scopes of their minds and hearts is fair, *indeed must be insisted upon*, but that does not mean we should judge the whole of them only by this part.’¹⁶

Imagine such a reflection about today’s masters: masters of ideology who crack whips of terror in the air, religious masters who shackle disciples to car bombs. Of course, a good end always vindicates evil means. But what good could possibly come from bin Laden’s savage revelations? If he wins the war, rest assured, historians shall forge goodness from the alloy of greatness. Time anneals the hot, fluid history that we experience to the cooled, solid history that future generations will remember.

But as the old adage goes, time is relative. It doesn’t take centuries to forge history. Within a few decades ‘Butcher Grant’ rose from being one of the worst Presidents to one of the greatest, and praised by some as the most popular American of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Current historians vindicate Ulysses S. Grant of his slaughter (in the Mexican War and Civil War) with heroic spin: he was determined to win – whatever the cost. It takes little imagination to spin that rhetoric around bin Laden. Whether future historians vindicate his terrorism as a protagonist’s means to an end, or footnote his insidious slaughter as an agonizing end with no meaning, depends on who wins the war.

War makes us what we are. Radical evil sometimes, even often, brings out the best in us. The end of slavery freed America. The destruction of fascism liberated Europe. The fall of communism elevated democracy worldwide. But the fact that communism was dying in 1989, just as the monarchies were dying in 1789, did not mean freedom evermore. Any more than the end of slavery in 1865 meant no more discrimination, and the destruction of fascism in 1945 terminated authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing intolerance forever. Likewise, capturing bin Laden does not mean the end of terrorism, any more than capturing Hussein meant the end of his legacy.

If bin Laden ever has a legacy, it will be the opposite of Washington’s. Washington’s war was a continuation of politics to build structures of peace, such as constitutional democracy.¹⁸ Bin Laden’s war erodes politics, such that we become inured with terror and can no longer imagine real peace.

Real peace is much like the real Washington: it’s bifurcated. Peace brings boredom, and boredom breeds volatility, a terrorizing explosive itch for action. A time to fire up the forge for tyrants like Hussein and terrorists like bin Laden. But peace brings opportunity, and opportunity breeds creativity for composers like Mozart to develop the personal mind. It also provides a time to respond rather than react, and to reflect on those who changed the world for the better, like Washington. Needless to say, that’s something to celebrate on Presidents’ Day.

¹⁶ Stephen Ambrose, *To America*. Simon and Schuster. 2002. p.13

¹⁷ According to historian Geoffrey Perret, Grant was even more popular than Abraham Lincoln (ibid).

¹⁸ Carl von Clausewitz’s famous claim that *war is the continuation of politics by other means* crystallizes an explanation for war in the modern era. For explanations of postmodern war see M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. 2004. Penguin..