Chapter 2

Washington Studies How to Rise in Colonial Society

BECAUSE CLASSICISM WAS THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF UPPER-CRUST colonial America, acting in a Roman manner was the clearest way to rise in that part of society. The best example of this is George Washington, which is surprising, because he was the least learned of the first four American presidents. But because he was not bookish and instead learned by observation and experience, he was perhaps more sensitive to the markers of status in his society. Classically shaped behavior was the road to respectability.

Washington was not a learned man, and he knew it. "I am conscious of a defective education," he once confessed to an aide-de-camp, David Humphreys, himself a 1771 graduate of Yale. He did not have a classical education, nor even a good education of any kind. He spoke only English, and was not widely read even in that language, mainly favoring books about farming, military affairs, and political pamphlets. He never traveled to Europe.

Washington's peers were conscious of this deficit. One evening in Philadelphia in 1791, John Adams (Harvard, 1755) debated with Timothy Pickering (Harvard, 1763) about whether their president was illiterate, or close to it. Pickering, who that year became postmaster general, contended that Washington "was So ignorant, that he had never read any Thing, not even on military Affairs: he could not write A Sentence of Grammar, nor Spell his Words." And so on.

Adams, then Washington's vice president, objected. "I had been in Congress with Washington in 1774 and in May and part of June 1775 and had heard and read all his Letters to Congress in 1775. 1776. 1777, and had formed a very different Opinion of his litterary Talent. His Letters were well written and well Spelled."

You are mistaken, Pickering countered: "He did not write them, he only copied them."

Well then, Adams asked, who did write them? Pickering said, "His Secretaries and Aids." (Pickering, who had held two major administrative posts in the Army during the War for Independence, later would serve as secretary of state under Washington and then Adams himself.)

Adams' own conclusion was that "Washington was not a Scholar is certain. That he was too illiterate, unlearned, unread, for his Station and reputation is equally past dispute." But he added insightfully that "He was indeed a thoughtful Man."

Thomas Jefferson also was long perplexed by Washington's ability to make his way in the world without having the sort of education then considered essential for a public life. He recognized that there was something unusual in the man. "His mind was great and powerful, without being of the very first order; . . . and as far as he saw, no judgment was ever sounder. It was slow in operation, being little aided by invention or imagination, but sure in conclusion."

Jefferson was many things, but he was never a soldier, so he probably did not grasp that in military life, a mind "slow in operation" tends to be not a fault but a strength. Indeed, it was a skill Washington had acquired rather painfully in his two wars. In leading combat operations, slow and steady thinking, followed with energetic execution, often is more effective than a series of hasty moves that tend to exhaust a force and expose it to attack. One of the more thoughtful commentators on Washington, Adrienne Harrison, herself a former Army officer, observes that early in his military career, Washington had a "propensity for rashness." He had to learn the hard way to operate more deliberately.

As to his education, Jefferson continued, Washington was no

great shakes. Jefferson was at once laudatory and condescending in sketching his predecessor's intellectual qualities:

> *Altho' in the circle of his friends, where he might be unreserved with safety, he took a free share in conversation, his colloquial talents were not above mediocrity, possessing neither copiousness of ideas, nor fluency of words. In public when called on for a sudden opinion, he was unready, short, and embarrassed. Yet he wrote readily, rather diffusely, in an easy & correct style. This he had acquired by conversation with the world for his education was merely reading, writing, and common arithmetic, to which he added surveying at a later day. His time was employed in action chiefly, reading little, and that only in Agriculture and English history.*

Yet, despite all his ambivalence, Jefferson ultimately found Washington had figured out how to become an exemplar of the classical standard. "Perhaps the strongest feature in his character was prudence, never acting until every circumstance, every consideration was maturely weighed; refraining if he saw a doubt, but, when once decided, going through with his purpose whatever obstacles opposed. His integrity was most pure, his justice the most inflexible I have ever known." *Prudent, considerate, careful, determined, honest,* and *inflexible*: Jefferson did not quite say so, but he was describing Washington as the American Cato, the eighteenth century's embodiment of virtue, the very ideal of what a public man should be. Even people who might not know anything about Cato would recognize these as the traits expected of great public men.

Indeed, Washington came closer to the Roman example than his peers precisely because he was a man of deeds, not of words. Adams, Jefferson, and Madison were articulate men of ideas—they wrote essays and letters, gave speeches, made arguments. Reading the comments of his two successors as president, one can only have a bit of sympathy for Washington. They were world-class talkers. He emphatically was not.

At times he must have felt his patience tried by them and by

Hamilton and his wordy peers. A proud, ambitious, and thin-skinned man, Washington also must have sensed their occasional condescensions. To be fair, these voluble civilians appear quite respectful in their treatment of Washington when compared to some of the generals around him during the war, such as Thomas Conway, Charles Lee, and Horatio Gates, who schemed to replace him as senior commander, and Benedict Arnold, who proved a traitor to Washington and to the American cause.

The Real George Washington

ALMOST EVERY BIOGRAPHER OF WASHINGTON SETS OUT DETERMINED to show us the real man, to bring that stiff image to life. In the nineteenth century, Paul Leicester Ford wrote at the outset of *The True George Washington* that "if the present work succeeds in humanizing Washington, and making him a man rather than a historical figure, its purpose will have been fulfilled." In the twentieth, another biographer subtitled his work "George Washington as a Human Being," which begs the question of what sort of creature other authors had studied. James Thomas Flexner, returning from a four-volume expedition into Washington's life, reported that he discovered "a fallible human being made of flesh and blood and spirit—not a statue of marble and wood." In our own century, Ron Chernow, in a fine study of Washington, states that "the goal of the present biography is to create a fresh portrait of Washington that will make him real, credible, and charismatic in the same way that he was perceived by his contemporaries."

But his chroniclers, in pursuing this humanizing mission, in fact seek to undo Washington's work of a lifetime, which was to discipline his turbulent emotions, build an image of lofty distance, and most of all, establish a reputation for valiant leadership, unselfish virtue, and unyielding honor—that is, someone with the makings of a great man. Washington would spend decades in erecting and polishing that statue of himself. Nathaniel Hawthorne was not

just being humorous when he mused that Washington was "born with his clothes on, and his hair powdered, and made a stately bow on his first appearance in the world." Rather, the novelist was putting his finger on the essence of the man.

One anecdote from the Constitutional Convention gives a sense of the effort Washington put into developing and preserving this potent public persona. Alexander Hamilton remarked to Gouverneur Morris (Columbia, 1768) on the general's social reserve, noting that even with close friends, he "allowed no one to be familiar with him." Morris disputed that. Hamilton challenged Morris, the next time he saw Washington, to slap him on the back in hearty greeting. Try that, Hamilton said, and I will reward you with a good, wine-filled dinner for a dozen friends. So it was that Morris, the next time he encountered Washington, shook the man's hand while grasping his shoulder. According to an account attributed to Hamilton, Washington "withdrew his hand, stepped suddenly back, fixed his eye on Morris for several minutes with an angry frown, until the latter retreated abashed, and sought refuge in the crowd. The company looked on in silence." Morris stated ruefully at the subsequent meal paid for by Hamilton that "nothing could induce me to repeat it."

Washington's Pursuit of Virtue

WASHINGTON DID NOT RECEIVE A FORMAL EDUCATION BECAUSE HIS FAther died when he was just eleven years old and then, when he was twenty, he lost his surrogate father, his older half brother Lawrence. In his lack of schooling, he grew up like most Americans of his time. In the America of 1775, there were only nine colleges, and out of a population of 2.5 million, there were just three thousand college graduates.

In colonial America, the typical young white boy got at best a year or two of schooling from four to six hours a day, which was enough to learn to read a bit and to add and subtract. After

that brush with learning he was set to farming with his family or to an apprenticeship. Most instruction consisted of oral repetition, mainly because paper was expensive. Girls, blacks, and First Peoples* generally received even less education. There was a major regional difference here. In New England, the Puritans were trying to make a new society, their "city upon a hill," and so established publicly supported "town schools," in part to enable people to read the Bible. But Virginians, and to a lesser extent other Southerners, were trying as much as possible to replicate existing English society, and so were less interested in educating the vast majority of children.

Washington never attended college, nor did he pick up Latin or French on his own, as the autodidact Benjamin Franklin did. As a youth, Washington read Caesar's *Commentaries* in translation, which indicates some curiosity about military affairs, but there is no record that he followed up on this by reading other Roman histories. This interest in Caesar was a bit unusual, because in the republican atmosphere of the eighteenth century, the Roman dictator was "conspicuous by his absence from most secondary curricula." Yet Washington remained an admirer. When he was sprucing up his house after marrying Martha Custis, among the decorations he ordered from London was a small bust of Caesar. However, his English buying agent was unable to find a Caesar of the size he wanted, and offered instead a list of the busts readily available: "Homer, Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Galens, Vestall Virgin Faustina Chaucer, Spencer, Johnson, Shakespear, Beaumont Fletcher, Milton, Prior, Pope, Congreve, Swift, Addison, Dryden, Locke, Newton." Washington apparently let the idea drop.

It is no surprise that *Cato* was his favorite play. The drama is as stiff as Washington strove to be, almost unreadable to us today. But, writes one specialist in the history of American theater, eighteenth-century audiences expected lengthy declamations and

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* Please see this book's introductory note on this usage.

were not put off by predictable plots. They came primed to enjoy the play's "crisp and quotable epigrams and the beautiful expression of worthy sentiments." We do not know how old Washington was when he first saw the play, which was performed in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1735; a year later at the College of William & Mary; and in 1749 in Philadelphia.

During the eighteenth century, Cato was the very embodiment of virtue. "Think Cato sees thee," was one of Franklin's sayings in his "almanacks." It was natural that the Roman would become Washington's ideal. He would know about the orator from the play, and also perhaps from listening to conversations about the portrayal of the man in *Plutarch's Lives*, which was enormously popular with eighteenth-century American elites. This is how Plutarch describes Cato:

> *It is said of Cato that even from his infancy, in his speech, his countenance, and all his childish pastimes, he discovered an inflexible temper, unmoved by any passion, and firm in everything. He was resolute in his purposes, much beyond the strength of his age, to go through with whatever he undertook. . . . It was difficult to excite him to laughter,—his countenance seldom relaxed even into a smile.*

Born to an aristocratic Roman family in 95 BC, Cato was considered remarkable even in his youth for his strict rejection of corruption and luxury. He possessed wealth, yet lived and dressed simply. Aside from that, he had a typical life for a successful Roman notable, first achieving military recognition by commanding a legion in Macedon, where he lived as his soldiers did, eschewing special food and lodging. He then began climbing the rungs of the Republican government. Plutarch states that "he undertook the service of the state as the proper business of an honest man." But in politics as in war, he stood out for his self-denying, hardworking approach. By learning accounting and studying the records of the treasury, he was able to detect and stop kickbacks, embezzlement, and a variety of other shady financial dealings by the office's senior functionaries.

Cato's first great political confrontation came in 63 BC, when Cicero, who had been elected consul the previous year, exposed the conspiracy of Catiline, a populist patrician who had stood for consul three times, only to be rejected each time. After the third such rebuff, Catiline and his followers apparently planned a violent takeover of the city. Cicero responded by calling for their execution. He was opposed in this by Julius Caesar, who was just beginning his own rise to political prominence. "Caesar at this time had not done much in the Roman world except fall greatly into debt," Anthony Trollope, a historian as well as a novelist, notes tartly. Caesar argued that the conspirators instead should simply be exiled. Cato denounced Caesar as pleading for false mercy that endangered the state. For the next two decades, the men would be relentless enemies as Cato struggled to preserve the Republic against Caesar's dictatorial ambitions. A few years later, Caesar proposed a law that would reward his veterans with government-owned land but in doing so would diminish the state's tax base. Cato spoke vigorously against this, provoking Caesar to have him dragged away. Cato continued to speak the entire time.

In January of 49 BC, Caesar led his troops into Italy, effectively declaring war on the Senate and provoking a civil war. Cato fled across the Adriatic to join Pompey, Caesar's former ally but now his enemy. When Caesar defeated Pompey, Cato led a remnant force across the Mediterranean to Africa. In April of 46 BC, facing capture, Cato committed suicide in Utica, a Roman town in what is now Tunisia, preferring death to submitting to Caesar. Julius Caesar himself was of course assassinated just two years later.

To become an American Cato, Washington would need to become a man of recognized great virtue. Despite his lack of education, he understood that for someone of his time and place, attainment of public virtue was the highest goal one could have in life. He also may have sensed that eighteenth-century "virtue" was essentially male—the root of the word is *vir*, the Latin word for man. To be virtuous was to be a public man with a reputation for selflessness. Washington likely never read the definition by Montesquieu, the eighteenth-century French political philosopher, of

"virtue" as "the love of the laws and of our country," but many of his peers did.

Young George Washington wove together these cultural strands when he wrote a letter in 1756, at the age of twenty-four, stating that in his life he would pursue "Honor and Reputation." In other words, he would judge his own actions by how they might affect those two things, and he would measure his peers the same way. Eventually he would come to personify them for his fellow Americans.

Today, that approach to life may seem profoundly conservative. But in the eighteenth century, it carried a whiff of egalitarianism. Aristocrats had little need to show public virtue—they held power and position by birth, and their rank would be unaffected by public esteem. Washington, the fatherless adolescent and third son for the purposes of inheritance, enjoyed no such advantage. "Justifying by virtue is a way of escaping hereditary control," observes Gordon Wood. Young George Washington had something to prove, and he saw how to do it.

Washington's American Education

JOHN ADAMS HAD IT RIGHT. WASHINGTON WAS NOT A PHILOSOPHER, BUT he was a sturdy practical thinker. By that, Adams seems to have meant that Washington was capable of observing and learning. He read all his life, but mainly about surveying and agriculture. His library consisted of books on those subjects, plus some history, law, and religion. There was little philosophy, and even less fiction or poetry.

So how did Washington acquire the ability to think critically, as he would do during the American Revolution?

Any answer is necessarily speculative. It appears that his consciousness of the gaps in his education made him a studious observer. On top of that, his early military defeats provided compelling incentives to make him want to learn from his experiences. More

than almost all his peers, he became able to study a situation, evaluate its facts, decide which ones were meaningful, develop a course of action in response to work toward a desired outcome, and verbalize the orders that needed to be issued.

Those are the basic steps in critical thinking, but the military commander's task is especially difficult because he or she must take one additional step, often the hardest one of all: ensuring that one's orders are implemented. It is one thing to know what to do, but quite another to get other people to do it. New presidents often make the mistake, for example, of paying too much attention to formulating policy and not enough to implementing it. Washington knew he needed help putting his thoughts into words. He would never become a strong writer, but he learned to compensate by finding helpers who possessed potent verbal skills, most notably Alexander Hamilton, who attended King's College (later Columbia) in New York City.

But all that was to come. The first question Washington faced as a youth was what to do with his life. He was of uncertain promise in the eyes of others. He hunted, danced, played cards and billiards, and tried to see how he might make his way in society. He did not appear to make much of an impression on anyone. Indeed, he appears almost interchangeable with the amiable but thick-tongued bachelors who people the background in Jane Austen's novels.

But Washington seemed to know he was destined for bigger things. He threw himself into life, quickly learning a trade as a surveyor and making a living at it while still a teenager. By November 1750, at the age of eighteen, he felt confident enough in his judgment and finances to make his first land purchase, a parcel of fine pastureland just west of the northern Shenandoah River. Within two years he owned a total of 2,315 acres in that verdant valley, which even now, some 270 years later, remains one of the most beautiful parts of the country. Even more significant, he was learning how to read the land, especially on the frontier, a skill that would serve him all his life, but most notably as a military commander.

His first appearance in public life came in the fall of 1753, when the royal governor of Virginia, Robert Dinwiddie, selected the twenty-one-year-old Washington for a difficult and perhaps dangerous mission: Carry a provocative diplomatic message from Virginia through the deep woods of the First Peoples country to the French officers moving into the headwaters of the Ohio Valley, around today's Pittsburgh, and tell them to withdraw. Then come back, again through the snow-covered wilds, with the French response, and deliver it to the governor in Williamsburg.

A Frontier Tutor

FOR ADAMS, WE WILL LOOK AT HIS TIME AT HARVARD AND THEN AS A schoolteacher as formative. For Madison, that would be his Princeton years. And for Jefferson, the crucial years probably were his time spent learning the law and then his sojourn in Paris. But the parallel for Washington was far from American colleges or French salons. Like many colonial Americans, he was educated in the frontier of his time, a much harder course of study. His prep school was surveying the Shenandoah Valley. His finishing school would be the backwoods of western Pennsylvania. And his graduate education, a few years later, would be witnessing the British military disaster in the same area, under the arrogant General Edward Braddock.

His tutor in the deep woods was Christopher Gist, a tough pioneer in his late forties who a few years earlier had paddled well down the Ohio River. This is how Washington's most thorough biographer, Douglas Southall Freeman, describes Gist:

> *No frontiersman understood the Indians better or had greater patience in dealing with them. Gist was a good shot, a fine hunter who seldom went hungry if there was any game in the woods, and he had a quick eye for good land. Few could excel him in making himself comfortable in the wilderness, as, for example, when he*

drove a panther from its lair under an overhanging rock and slept cheerfully there on a January night in 1752. . . . More than any other man, Gist was to be George's teacher in the art of the frontiersman.

Washington received his formal orders on October 31, 1753. The trip northwestward in the mild November weather went well. By mid-December he reached the French fort at Venango, in today's far northwestern Pennsylvania. They received him cordially. The wine flowed copiously over dinner and his French hosts began to speak freely, he reported. The French at Venango may have been in their cups, but there was *veritas* in their *vino*:

The Wine, as they dos'd themselves pretty plentifully with it, soon banish'd the restraint which at first appear'd in their Conversation, & gave license to their Tongues to reveal their Sentiments more freely. They told me it was their absolute Design to take Possession of the Ohio, & by G——they wou'd do it, for tho' they were sensible, that the English cou'd raise two Men for their one; yet they knew their Motions were too slow & dilatory to prevent any Undertaking of theirs.

There is a lot going on in that intelligence report. It includes what the enemy intended to do and why they thought they could achieve it, as well as their view that the British were dawdlers and their assessment of the relative strength of each side.

Washington's next stop was at Fort Le Boeuf, a new outpost just sixteen miles south of the shore of Lake Erie. It was a strategic location, one of the most important forts on the continent, anchoring the French line of communication in North America, which ran in a great arc from the St. Lawrence River through the Great Lakes to the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, and so to the Gulf of Mexico. While Washington talked there to the regional French commander, Captain Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, his companions outside scouted the French encampment, noted their heavy weapons—some nine cannons—and counted some 220 canoes already built and ready, and others being prepared. This last

was a clear sign that the French were preparing to launch a riverine armada to enforce their claim to the upper Ohio Valley—that is, today's western Pennsylvania and a bit of western Maryland. Legardeur gave him a letter of response to pass to the governor of Virginia.

Washington perceived that it was essential to get word back to Williamsburg as quickly as possible that the French were preparing for war, which, given their strong relationships with First Peoples tribes, would wreak havoc on the western line of British settlements along the eastern slope of the Appalachians. He set out with haste, but December brought two weeks of rain and snow and then a severe cold snap. Washington's homeward-bound party sometimes had to carry their canoes when the creeks were frozen over. Next, their mounts began to falter. "The Horses grew less able to travel every Day. The Cold increas'd very fast, & the Roads were geting much worse by a deep Snow continually Freezing," he wrote.

As the horses began to fail, Washington decided that he should proceed through the snowy woods on foot. Few physical activities are as taxing as breaking a trail through deep, crusted snow, which is probably what he and Gist faced. Each step requires an effort, and the footing is constantly uncertain, as one's boots break through the crusty top and sink onto unseen rocks and snag on branches under the snow. In normal walking, as one foot is planted, the other swings forward. But in deep snow, a planted boot cannot swing forward in turn through the snow, but instead must be lifted up from the hole it has just made and then moved forward over the snow and placed down again, requiring twice the effort for half the progress, with each step. And so on, endlessly.

Gist, who was far more experienced in the wilderness, objected to Washington's plan for the two of them to move on foot, but Washington insisted—and despite his youth, he was the commander of their tiny expedition. His enormous force of will, perhaps his most significant quality as an adult, was beginning to emerge. As Plutarch wrote of Cato, "He was resolute in his purposes, much

beyond the strength of his age, to go through with whatever he undertook."

As they hiked through the snow they met a First Peoples tribesman who claimed to know of a shortcut he could show them. But as the tribesman led them suspiciously to the northeast, Gist grew wary. A few miles later, the man, leading the way, turned and fired on them with his musket. While he was reloading, they grabbed and bound him. Gist wanted to kill him. Washington disagreed and set him loose, perhaps not wanting to stir up the man's comrades. They made a campfire, warmed themselves, and then after sunset moved off, walking all night.

When they finally reached the Allegheny River, they found it not completely frozen over. They used their sole hatchet to cut wood to build a raft—slow, draining work. At sundown they set off. In the middle of the stream, an ice jam built up against the upriver side of the raft, tumbling Washington into the freezing water. They spent a miserable night on an island in midstream, Washington partly encased in ice and Gist suffering frostbite. "The Cold was so extream severe, that Mr. Gist got all his Fingers, & some of his Toes Froze," Washington noted in his report to the governor.

The arctic conditions did them one favor: In the morning, the remainder of the river was frozen from their island to the far shore. They walked across that ice and then the remaining ten miles to the welcome food and fire of a trading post. Washington purchased a horse and rode hard to Williamsburg, where on January 16, 1754, he presented the French response. "Precisely one month had passed from the day George had left Fort Le Boeuf—season considered, a splendid achievement," in the judgment of his biographer Freeman.

The letter to the governor from the French, signed by Captain Legardeur, was both polite and clear. The key sentence came in the fourth paragraph: "As for the summons you send me to retire, I do not think myself obliged to obey it."

Washington learned a lot from this journey, but not all of it was correct. From this first encounter, he took away a mistaken

impression of the French. "The shabby and ragged appearance the French common Soldiers make affords great matter for ridicule amongst the Indians and I really believe is the chief motive why they hate and despise them as they do," he informed the governor. In fact, the French tended to be superior fighters, seasoned in the ways of North American warfare. And contrary to what Washington believed, the First Peoples were inclined to support the French more than the British, because they had observed that the French were interested solely in trade, but that when the British built a fort, English settlers followed and cleared woods for farming, and then the land grew crowded and game became scarcer.

Fort Necessity and British Disrespect

THE BRITISH COUNTER-RESPONSE WOULD BE IN THE FORM OF A MILITARY expedition. Less than two weeks after making his report, Washington, still just aged twenty-one, applied to be the lieutenant colonel of the Virginia Regiment—that is, the unit's deputy commander. Despite his youth, he was a natural choice, having demonstrated his stamina and dedication in his recent journey, during which he had become familiar with the lands in dispute.

But almost from the beginning, he would be torn between the honor of being chosen and the insult of Virginia troops being treated (and paid) worse than militiamen sent from other colonies. Aggravating the situation, the captain who commanded one of those state militia detachments held a British commission and so would decline to come under Washington's command, on the grounds that a British officer could not take orders from a colonial officer, even if the colonial held a higher rank.

Soon another promotion came Washington's way, when the chosen commander fell from his horse and died two days later, leaving Washington in charge at the front. He was now twenty-two, and he had his hands full. At almost the same time, the disgruntlement of his subordinate officers over their unequal treatment by

the British government began to boil over. They were particularly upset that they were ordered to build a road into the Ohio country that other soldiers would use later, as reinforcements arrived from other colonies, but that they were being paid less than those men. They handed him a written protest. He essentially agreed with their views, yet as the commander in the field could hardly join their cause.

He came close. "I am heartily concerned, that the officers have such real cause to complain," he wrote to Governor Dinwiddie. "I really do not see why the lives of his Majesty's subjects in Virginia should be of less value, than of those in other parts of his American dominions; especially when it is well known, that we must undergo double their hardship. I could enumerate a thousand difficulties that we have met with, and must expect to meet with, more than other officers who have almost double our pay."

Even more galling was the disrespect inherent in this unequal treatment. If it were not for the imminent danger presented by the French, Washington warned, the officers might well quit. "Nothing prevents their throwing down their commissions . . . but the approaching danger, which has too far engaged their honor to recede till other officers are sent in their room, or an alteration made regarding their pay," he told the governor.

That danger was genuine, and moving closer. Early on the morning of May 27, Gist rode into Washington's camp in Great Meadows, a grassy spot atop the last big ridge on the west slope of the Alleghenies. He carried crucial information. The previous day about fifty Frenchmen had walked into Gist's frontier settlement in a surly mood. Unobserved by them, Gist rode off to warn Washington. En route, he observed the tracks of a smaller French party that was hovering nearby, just five miles northwest of Great Meadows.

Iroquois scouts working for Washington located, about half a mile from a major trail, the hiding place of that French advance patrol, in a sheltered pocket of the forest tucked into the base of a cliff on one side and shielded by a field of boulders, some as high as fifteen feet. Washington and the tribal chief the British called

Half King led an ambush party there, through groves of maple, beech, and oak trees, their leaves still bearing the bright green of late spring. The Americans fired down from the top of the cliff, on the west, and from the upper slope of the glen, to the south. Tribal warriors blocked the natural escape route downhill in the glen, northward. The skirmish was short and shocking. Soon ten Frenchmen lay dead or dying. One fled, while the surviving twenty-one surrendered. Among the dead was Joseph Coulon de Jumonville, the leader of the French party. "The Indians scalped the Dead," Washington noted in his diary. Washington's party suffered just one dead and two or three wounded.

The fight lasted just fifteen minutes, yet marked the start of a conflict that would last almost a decade and flare around the world—the French and Indian War. The French would claim that Jumonville was on a diplomatic mission to tell the British to withdraw, but this seems doubtful given the large and armed nature of their party, and their aggressive behavior at Gist's settlement.

Washington seems to have been almost elated afterward. "I heard Bulletts whistle and believe me there was something charming in the sound," he wrote to his half brother John Augustine Washington. When his letter was published later that year in both Virginia and London, that line raised some eyebrows. To some readers, Washington was engaging in youthful bravado. "He would not say so, if he had been used to hear many," King George II reportedly remarked. But such sneers probably did the young man an injustice. He had just led men into combat and emerged the victor, a heady combination. He also may have been pleased to find that he enjoyed doing so.

Washington pulled back a few miles from the ambush site to Great Meadows, one of the only places in the dense forests where there was grass available for horses and cattle, as well as room for the reinforcements he knew would soon arrive. He oversaw the building of a small palisaded fort and hunkered down for the inevitable French counterattack. He and his men also waited for food and other supplies, which were slow to arrive.

The French assault came a few weeks later, and was led by Louis

Coulon de Villiers—significantly, the elder half brother of the slain Jumonville. Coulon, unlike the newly blooded Washington, was a seasoned veteran of fighting in French North America, having ranged across a huge area, from what is now Michigan and Wisconsin to Louisiana and northern New York.

Bracing for the French reaction, the British and colonial troops under Washington were hungry, demoralized, and outnumbered. Their Iroquois allies, no fools, saw the probable outcome and began slipping away, forcing Washington to rely solely on white scouts, far less adept in reading the woods. When the battle began at about eleven in the morning on July 3, 1754, Washington had fewer than three hundred soldiers rated capable of fighting.

The fight was as one-sided as the May ambush had been, but this time in favor of the French. Most of it took place in a drenching rain, making firing weapons increasingly difficult. By the dismal twilight, Washington's force had suffered about a hundred dead or wounded. French losses were just three dead and seventeen wounded. The French offered to parley. Washington had never learned French and had only one unwounded officer who could speak the language. That was Jacob van Braam, a Dutchman who claimed to have been an officer in Europe and whose English was faulty. Amid the mud and blood, the wounded and the dead, in the impending darkness, van Braam translated for Washington a proffered document of surrender. It isn't clear whether Washington knew that in signing his name to the damp paper, he was confessing to what the document termed the "assassination" of Jumonville.

Coulon that night became the only officer to whom Washington would surrender in his entire life. He allowed the Virginians to leave in the morning with their light arms and also some gunpowder to defend themselves on the march through the forested ridges back to British-held territory.

Washington's woes were just beginning, though. The following spring, the British mounted an expedition to go west of the Appalachians and eject the French. Washington was desperate to be part of it, but not if he had to take orders from lower-ranking

officers who held British commissions. "This was too degrading for G. W. to submit to," he later explained to his first biographer. Plainly he felt his honor to be at stake.

Braddock's Defeat

NEXT CAME THE SERIES OF EVENTS THAT, WHILE DISASTROUS, MAY have molded Washington for the future. Certainly without them he would have been less prepared to weather the troubles of the War for Independence.

He had at this time the negative but instructive example of General Edward Braddock, commander of the British force. Braddock took on Washington as one of his personal aides without rank or pay—but with something more desirable to Washington, public honor. The young Virginian found the old general "generous & disinterested—but plain and blunt in his manner even to rudeness." Reading that last phrase, one might wonder if at some point the general had wearied of Washington's griping about his lack of a British commission and told the young man to drop it.

Yet others found Braddock dangerously arrogant. Benjamin Franklin wrote in his *Autobiography* years later that when he met with Braddock about getting the government of Pennsylvania to send wagons and supplies, "he had too much self-confidence, too high an Opinion of the Validity of Regular Troops, and too mean a One of both Americans and Indians." George Croghan, a veteran frontier trader working as a guide for the expedition, appears to have confided in Franklin that Braddock "slighted & neglected" the tribal scouts, "and they gradually left him." When Franklin expressed some doubts to Braddock himself, he added, the general responded dismissively that "these Savages may indeed be a formidable Enemy to your raw America Militia; but, upon the King's regular & disciplin'd Troops, Sir, it is impossible they should make any Impression."

Braddock was not shy about denigrating his Americans. He

reported to London that "the greatest part [were] Virginians, very indifferent Men, this country affording no better."

And so at the end of May 1755, full of unwarranted self-confidence, the self-assured British marched westward toward the Ohio headwaters. The force consisted of an advance guard, a party just behind them cutting trees and moving rocks, a main body with the baggage and big guns, and finally a rear guard. Moving on the mile-long column's sides, about one hundred yards out, were flankers to screen any attack. It was slow, hard movement, up dozens of high ridges and then down them to cross rivers and streams.

Not far beyond those flankers sometimes lurked hostile First Peoples warriors. They were there less to impede the British force than to gather intelligence on its composition and procedures. They did this mainly by conducting probing attacks. On June 25, three soldiers, probably sent out to round up grazing horses, were shot and scalped, and a wagoneer was also killed.

After a few weeks the tribal scouts had developed a good understanding of the British mode of warfare. At Fort Duquesne, as the French called their outpost at what is now Pittsburgh, a Delaware tribesman boasted to an English prisoner about how the warriors were scouting the British and would eventually attack them. "Shoot um down all one pigeon," he declared confidently. The Delaware may have been not just boasting, but describing with some precision an ambush plan based on how passenger pigeons typically were hunted back when great clouds of them still flew through the acorn-laden forests around the Great Lakes. First, make a loud noise to scare the roosting flock into the air, and then, in the moment while they are still clustered, have a group of shooters quickly fire multiple volleys, downing many birds before they have time to scatter.

As the British expedition moved westward, Washington fell violently ill and was left behind in the Maryland hills to recover. When he was slightly better but still weak, he rode forward, sitting on pillows tied to his saddle, to catch up with Braddock. Washington was bothered mentally as well as physically, terribly

anxious that he might miss any action in the biggest European military operation on North American soil to date. He pushed himself hard and rejoined the British force.

Around midday on July 9, 1755, the two elite grenadier companies at the head of Braddock's mile-long column forded the winding Monongahela River twice, the water reaching to their knees. At both crossings there were indications that tribal warriors were in the area—fresh footprints in the mud, sightings in the forest. The grenadiers began ascending a path that slanted up across the face of a hill. They were heading for a trail that soon would lead them to Fort Duquesne, just a few miles away. Their caps displayed the phrase *"Nec Aspera Terrent"*—that is, "not frightened by difficulties." They arrived at a point where their trail crossed a ravine.

"The Indians are upon us," shouted one of the soldiers at the front. The enemy force consisted of roughly seven hundred tribal warriors—mainly Hurons, Shawnees, Miamis, and Senecas—and about two hundred French and Canadians. Some even were Osage, who had traveled from west of the Mississippi specifically to participate in the battle, a sign of good long-term planning and wide-ranging diplomacy on the part of the French. It was, writes military historian David Preston, author of the most authoritative account of the battle, the largest First Peoples force ever assembled on behalf of the French to that point.

The tribal warriors rippled out along both British flanks, forming a semicircle, more on the uphill side than on the downhill. "As soon as the Enemys Indians perceiv'd our Grenadiers, they divided themselves & Run along our right & Left flanks," wrote Captain Harry Gordon, an engineering officer.

British flankers, who had been protecting the column, fled before them, running back toward the main body. In the noise, confusion, shouting, and smoke, the flankers' own comrades began to fire on them. The warriors, knowing from their time tracking Braddock's force in the forest that most of the cannons were in the center of the column, focused their fire there, understanding it was key to silence the cannons quickly. They were demonstrating

how dangerous it had been for Braddock to underestimate their ability to plan and wage war.

The British force collapsed on itself, the advance guard falling back even as the rear kept moving up. It degenerated into a huge knot of terrified men. "Nothing afterwards was to Be Seen Amongst the Men But Confusion & Panick," recalled Captain Gordon. "They form'd Altogether, the Advanced & Main Body in Most places from 12 to 20 Deep." Packed so tightly, few soldiers could actually fire at the foe, greatly reducing their combat effectiveness.

This was the pivotal moment in the battle. The tribesmen were operating with a speed and precision that outstripped the British ability to react. As Preston puts it, "Experienced [tribal] war captains led their men along the flanks of Braddock's column with great efficacy, seeking opportune places to strike as well as cover that offered security to their men. Native squads functioned like modern fire teams as they extended the killing zone." They particularly targeted the officers, conspicuous on horseback, effectively destroying the British ability to command and control their force.

Washington, riding about the battlefield to try to bring some order to the chaotic scene, had several shots pass through his clothes but was not wounded. He thought that many of the soldiers were firing indiscriminately, without knowing whether they were hitting friend or foe. "Our own cowardly . . . regulars . . . gatherd themselves into a body contrary to orders 10 or 12 deep, woud then level, Fire, & shoot down the Men before them." The British troops "broke and run as Sheep before Hounds," he wrote with disdain nine days later. These were serious allegations, but if the British were going to degrade his honor, he would do the same when they faltered in their duty.

The British force lost all combat cohesion. When the tribal fighters had silenced the British cannons, "the whole Body gave way," Gordon, the engineering officer wrote. General Braddock took a round through a shoulder and lung but remained in command. He eventually gave the order to fall back and then to retreat. Riding across the Monongahela, Gordon turned to see warriors

on the bank behind him "tomohocking some of our Women & wounded people." Already shot in the right arm, he took a second bullet through the right shoulder.

In all, of a total British force of about 1,200, about two-thirds were killed or wounded, an extraordinary toll. The numbers differ in various histories because some reports included the casualties suffered by wagoneers and other civilians. The British officers were especially hard hit, with about sixty of eight-five killed or wounded, leaving the force almost decapitated. A small number of the British were taken prisoners. Their First Peoples captors marched them back to Fort Duquesne and burned some of them at the stake.

Any large-scale military movement can be difficult. Retreating after a defeat is always hard, and often is the point when a force suffers some of its heaviest personnel losses through attacks from pursuers or simple desertion. But perhaps the most challenging of all retreats is withdrawing at night through hostile, wooded, mountainous territory after a severe setback. The harrowing experience can easily shatter an army. Washington saw it all that night as he rode with two escorts the sixty miles through the wilderness to deliver an order from Braddock to a rear camp to bring up food and medical articles. As he moved through the gloom, his horse occasionally would halt and then gingerly step over the wounded and dead lying in the mud, some of them crying out for help. Decades later, Washington would recall that painful night with revulsion:

> *The shocking Scenes which presented themselves in this Nights March are not to be described—The dead—the dying—the groans—lamentation—and crys along the Road of the wounded for help . . . were enough to pierce a heart of adamant. the gloom & horror of which was not a little encreased by the impervious darkness occasioned by the close shade of thick wood.*

Braddock, having been carried dozens of miles in a makeshift litter, perished on July 13. Washington, having rejoined the remains

of the column, presided over interring the general, wrapped in a blanket, in an unmarked grave in the road the army had built, the better to hide the body from any pursuing warriors seeking his scalp.

The British had abandoned so much equipment on the battlefield, the French and tribesmen were kept busy going through it. Their force had suffered about twenty-five dead and an equal number wounded. Among the gear they carried off were at least six cannons, four howitzers, and four mortars. Some of those pieces would resurface for years as the war continued, employed with great effect by the French in subsequent sieges of British forts.

The experience of his second battlefield defeat in two years did not bolster Washington's health. "I am still in a weak and Feeble condn which induces me to halt here 2 or 3 Days in hopes of recovg a little Strength, to enable me to proceed homewards," he wrote to his mother from a stop on the road back east.

Washington Mulls His Situation

IN THE DAYS AND WEEKS AFTERWARD, RECUPERATING AT HIS HOME AT Mount Vernon, Virginia, which he would inherit after the deaths of his brother Lawrence and Lawrence's widow and son, Washington began to wonder if it was all worth it. He marveled at the magnitude of the defeat: "When this story comes to be Related in future Annals, it will meet with unbelief and indignation; for had I not been witness to the act on that fatal Day, I should scarce have given credit to it even now." He again took the trouble to pin blame on the British regulars for a shameful performance.

The same day, he glumly summarized his military career in a melancholy letter to his half brother Augustine. First, "I was employ'd to go a journey in the Winter (when I believe few or none woud have undertaken it) and what did I get by it? my expences borne!" Next, "after putting myself to a considerable expence in equipping and providing Necessarys for the Campaigne—I went

out, was soundly beaten, lost them all." That wasn't all, he added, "I then went out a Volunteer with Genl Braddock and lost all my Horses." In truth, he had little to show for it.

What he wanted in life, he told the governor plainly, was "Honor and Reputation in the Service"—the noblest of goals from a classical perspective, which he had absorbed as an aspiring member of Virginia's ruling class. And he still deeply resented being treated by the British as a second-class officer. "We want nothing but Commissions from His Majesty to make us as regular a Corps as any upon the Continent."

In command of an outpost on the receding frontier, he fretted over the disorder and indiscipline of the surviving troops. "I see the growing Insolence of the Soldiers, the Indolence, and Inactivity of the Officers," he warned the governor. When panicked reports arrived of a tribal raid a few miles away, leaving "horrid Murders" in its wake, he marched out with a party of forty-one men, only to find that the disturbance was actually caused by "3 drunken Soldiers of the Light Horse carousing, firing their Pistols, and uttering the most unheard off Imprecation's." This was another unhappy lesson in holding an army together.

Desertions became a major problem. He ordered the building of a huge gallows, towering nearly forty feet, as a warning to his men. "I am determined, if I can be justified in the proceeding, to hang two or three on it, as an example to others," he wrote. Two weeks later, he did just that, ordering the executions of two deserters—William Smith, a twenty-year-old saddler, and Ignatius Edwards, twenty-five, a carpenter described as "a great Dancer & Fidler." He pardoned twelve others who were convicted with them, with some of those reprieved being flogged instead. "They were proper objects to suffer: Edwards had deserted twice before, and Smith was accounted one of the greatest villains upon the continent," Washington reported to the governor.

The war continued. In the summer of 1758, the British severed the French line of communication across Lake Ontario, effectively isolating the French contingent in the Ohio headwaters area and forcing them to retreat. Washington, in the British force

once again, arrived to see the smoldering ruins of the abandoned French fort, with the French paddling away down the Ohio. On the ashes the British began building the replacement they would name Fort Pitt. The French and Indian War would continue, but its focus moved elsewhere, to the northeastern colonies and to Canada. Eventually the French would be utterly routed, but not without great financial cost to the British.

The departure of the French from the Ohio headwaters presented a timely moment for Washington to resign his position, go home to his plantation, and get on with his life—and that is precisely what he did. One can only wonder if he was familiar with a comment of Cicero's, in an echo of Xenophon, that "of all sources of wealth, farming is the best, the most agreeable, the most profitable, the most noble."

There were two final touches in his basic education in life. First, in January 1759, he married a wealthy widow, Martha Custis. He also won election as a delegate to Virginia's House of Burgesses, the colony's elected legislative body. He took his seat a month after his wedding, on his twenty-seventh birthday, and served there for fifteen years. He would not do much as a member, but it is significant that he repeatedly stood for public office and was consistently reelected, and then he was chosen to be part of Virginia's delegation to the First Continental Congress in the fall of 1774. Yes, he later would be a general who became president. But before that, he was an officer who became a local politician. He was a member of the House of Burgesses far longer than he was a general at war. And after being a general, of course, he again would be a politician—and a notably successful one.

Born in Defeat

MORE THAN ANY OF THE OTHER EARLY PRESIDENTS, GEORGE WASHINGTON learned in early life the pain of loss, humiliation, and hardship. It is axiomatic among military historians that commanders

learn more from defeat than from victory, but this is especially true of Washington. He had been taught many hard lessons and would have two decades in which to mull them over before he fought again. Reviewing his experiences, he could have distilled them into some general maxims along these lines:

- Know yourself, and know those you are fighting. This is a more complex proposition than it may seem, as it requires introspection, strategic thinking, and reliable intelligence.
- Study the terrain and make it your friend.
- As circumstances change, be ready to change views and abandon assumptions. Listen to dissenters and know how to weigh alternatives.

He also had absorbed some specific lessons about waging war in eighteenth-century North America. He had worked with indigenous allies. He had developed an appreciation of the military and diplomatic resourcefulness of the French. Long before Adams and Jefferson would treat with the great powers in Europe, Washington had engaged in diplomacy with tribes in the watershed of the Ohio—and with the French there, too.

He would carry this knowledge with him all his life. He had developed a new appreciation for the French, warning a comrade that "the policy of the French is so subtle, that not a friendly Indian will we have on the continent, if we do not soon dislodge them from the Ohio." This was a matter not just of manpower but also of military intelligence—a European force in the dense forests of North America that moved without having local allies to act as scouts was operating almost blind.

In addition, he had learned that his lack of tribesmen to operate as a screening force gave the French and their allies an opening to move freely in the forests and so closely observe British movements. "We cannot suppose the French, who have their Scouts constantly out, can be so difficient in point of Intelligence, as to be unacquainted with our Motions when we are advancing by slow degrees towards them."

In strategic terms, he had seen events that would resonate with him decades later during the War for Independence. First, he had seen the French appear to be on the cusp of victory in the war, only to lose years later. Second, he had witnessed an army of British regulars shattered in a battle with people born in North America. Third, he had seen in Braddock's spectacular failure what can happen to a general who disregards informed advice and fails to adapt his approach to the circumstances.

Most of all, he had seen that he himself could recover from stinging personal defeat—and also, perhaps, that the key goal of a general is sometimes not to win but merely to keep his army alive. His conclusion as a commander, he wrote in 1757, was that "Discipline is the soul of an army." This was a crucial lesson, not just for his command of troops, but for his command of himself.

Which would prove more influential in American history, Washington's practical education on the frontier or the study by Adams, Jefferson, and Madison of classical history, philosophy, and rhetoric? It is impossible to say. The answer is probably that both were essential. His college-educated comrades learned what was needed to found and design a new kind of nation; Washington, in a different but equally daunting school, learned what was necessary to liberate it and lead it toward stability. More than any other founder, concludes Gordon Wood, Washington "always understood power and how to use it." What could be more Roman than the prudent exercise of power?