

George Washington: Uniting a Nation. By Don Higginbotham. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002. 176 pages. \$22.95 (cloth), \$16.95 (paper).

George Washington Reconsidered. Edited by Don Higginbotham. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001. 352 pages. \$55.00 (cloth), \$19.50 (paper).

Reviewed by Whitman H. Ridgway, *University of Maryland, College Park*

The Founders are enjoying renewed scholarly attention. Major historians offer new studies of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and the paragon of the genre, George Washington himself. Washington's legacy as a planter, soldier, guiding force behind the Continental army, and first president are well known. These two books promise to enhance readers' appreciation of his contribution as a committed nationalist and to portray Washington as a more complex individual than is often recognized.

George Washington: Uniting a Nation is a short, interpretive volume, appended by six original documents, which originated as a series of lectures. Don Higginbotham argues that historians have failed to appreciate Washington's consistent efforts to unify the nation, especially in the 1780s, and to counteract the pressures of regionalism, state sovereignty, and influence, both foreign and domestic. Drawing on his experience from the Revolution, Washington recognized that the nation would not survive without stronger central authority, which he articulated in his "Circular to the State Governments" (1783), and continued to advocate after that. Though Washington avoided open association with prominent nationalists, Higginbotham argues that he was a persistent proponent of a stronger national government throughout the 1780s. He was less concerned about his reputation when setting off to attend the Constitutional Convention than he was that such reform would be accomplished. As president, Washington reached out to the defeated Anti-Federalists as he had to loyalists after the war, and Higginbotham argues that policies sometimes attributed to Madison or Hamilton were his own. In sum, "from the moment of his appointment as commander in chief of the Continental Army to his retirement from the presidency over two decades later, Washington maintained his focus on American unity" (7–8).

George Washington Reconsidered is a collection of thirteen essays, almost all of which have previously appeared in print, with a historiographical introduction and headnotes by the editor. Inspired by the bicentennial of Washington's death, Higginbotham offers this collection as "a new trend away from mainline political and institutional history: an examination of the man: his family, his home, his agricultural pursuits, his slaves, his hopes for the West, and his attitude towards death and afterlife" (3).

"The Virginia Localist" section examines Washington's British lineage, his pursuits as a colonial planter and a militia officer, and his involvement with slavery. Martin H. Quitt, in the most intellectually engaging chapter of the book, examines the circumstances leading to John Washington's immigration to Virginia in 1656. Sometimes portrayed as a victim of religious persecution, Quitt argues that Washington's real motive was the pursuit of commerce, and that his experience in the tobacco trade enabled him to marry well and to be accepted quickly into the colonial elite. Bruce A. Ragsdale writes insightfully about the changing patterns of the tobacco trade in the 1760s and Washington's decision to abandon tobacco for grain. Washington, however, enjoyed several advantages other planters lacked: he managed his debt, and he was able to send tobacco to his London agent from other plantations, which funded purchases required for the conversion to grain production at Mount Vernon. Dorothy Twohig depicts Washington's growing dissatisfaction with slavery as a labor system even as he, like Jefferson, despaired of the social problems he anticipated in a postslavery society.

“The American Nationalist” section describes Washington’s transition from a localist to a passionate unionist, and includes chapters on the West, the Farewell Address, and his death. Higginbotham, after examining Washington’s colonial military career in the previous section, argues that Washington’s Continental army experience convinced him that the nation could not depend on a militia for its defense and that a strong national government was required to preserve the union. Glenn A. Phelps evaluates Washington as a republican general whose attitudes were transformed by his war experiences. Distrusting the militia as being unreliable, and lacking confidence in the average soldier, Washington believed that it was important to motivate officers by tying their interests to that of the nation. Such leaders, he claimed, must embody republican virtue and government ought to enforce republican laws. By the end of the war, it was clear that republicanism could not be entrusted to the states; it could only be secured by a stronger national government. Joseph J. Ellis, with characteristic style and insight, analyzes Washington’s Farewell Address in a chapter reprinted from *Founding Brothers*. He observes that “Washington intended it as advice to his countrymen about how to sustain national unity and purpose, not just without him but without a king” (219–20). The final chapter in this section, by Peter R. Henriques, addresses Washington’s views of an afterlife and the stoicism with which he met his own fatal illness.

The final section, “Images of the Man,” is the least satisfactory. Though there are three fine chapters written by eminent historians—on Washington’s careful attention to his legacy in the collection of his papers, his characteristic aloofness, and an assessment of his greatness—none ventures far from traditional historical boundaries. One would hope for more innovative work in this section. Perhaps someone trained in gender history could have examined Washington as a model of manliness in the revolutionary era. Alternatively, a study of his visual images over time, including the significance of the late 1790s debate over whether to use his image on American coins, could have been compelling reading.

Intriguing questions about Washington and his legacy remain. How universal was the alienation of Virginia land speculators as a consequence of the Proclamation of 1763 if Washington considered it to be only a short-term impediment to his own ambitions? Washington’s commitment to republican government, apparent in his relations with civil authorities during the war and in his Farewell Address, needs to be balanced against his exercise of executive powers during his presidency. These chapters and documents also call for a reassessment of his reputation for being above politics in the 1780s. If he were a hidden-hand politician, what was the real extent of his activities? His reputation for formality requires juxtaposition with his fondness for cards and other forms of wartime camaraderie as well as the significance of the observation by the British minister’s wife that he was kind, affable, cheerful, and happy during social visits when he was recalled to Philadelphia to organize the army in 1799. Though much is revealed about his attitudes toward blacks, by his reluctance to recruit them into the Continental army and his treatment of his own bondsmen, it would be instructive to know more about his reaction to the Haitian Revolution and his role in formalizing American policies with France and Great Britain when dealing with that challenge.

These two books target two separate audiences. *George Washington Reconsidered* will be valued by professional historians as a useful statement of contemporary scholarship. *George Washington: Uniting a Nation* will probably find its greatest use in the classroom where the combination of a comprehensive interpretation augmented by original sources will be helpful as a supplemental text.