The Command of Our Own Fortunes

Three Lectures on the Statesmanship of George Washington

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Mount Vernon Ladies Association
2010

Lecture I:

Washington as Founder: "I walk on untrodden ground"

September 15, 2010

Thank you, Gay, for that warm introduction. It is an incredible honor to be the Gay Hart Gaines Distinguished Visiting Fellow in American History here at Mount Vernon.

I must begin by saying that what you, and Jim Rees, and the Mount Vernon Ladies Association have done here for Washington, and for the country, is truly remarkable.

Along with the work of Lew Lehrman, whose generosity makes this series (and many other things) possible, you are all great stewards of America's noble heritage.

This is a very special place in my own life, and I am glad to be here with so many I admire: Ed and Linda Feulner, Tom and Jordan Saunders, former Attorney General Ed Meese and Ursula Meese.

I could go on, but I would be remiss if I didn't also mention my better half by far, Elizabeth.

I can think of no better place to celebrate George Washington, and mark the anniversary this very evening of the closing business and final vote of the Constitutional Convention. That great work was completed, to be engrossed and then signed two days hence, on September 17, 1787.

It was all the more momentous because just four years earlier, the future of the country was entirely uncertain.

An Auspicious Moment

It was in 1783 that General Washington spoke of an "auspicious period" in which fundamental choices would establish or ruin the national character forever.[1] It could be a favorable moment, for sure, but only if Americans seized the occasion and made it their own.

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[1] Washington, Circular to the States, June 8, 1783, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931–1944) 26:483-96.

Today, as we approach the 225th anniversary of the signing of the Constitution the year after next, there is a sense that we have come to another such moment, a turning point that has been building for some time – and that the decisions we make now will determine our nation's course, for better or perhaps for worse.

The trouble with turning points, of course, is that it is impossible to know at the time that you are in one. Worse, one does not know—indeed, cannot know—the outcome. As a result, there is a widespread feeling of uncertainty, and a deep anxiety about our future. Are we becoming just another unexceptional nation, like all the others?

In these times, it is more than intriguing, especially to those of us who have long lamented the decline of historical knowledge, that so many are looking to the American past, digging up old documents, and recurring to the nation's first principles. Who would have thought that so many Americans still cling to their Declaration of Independence and Constitution?

Yet here we are discussing and debating in the public square the ideas of those old faded parchments.

This is a teaching moment – a moment to turn the public sentiment of the day into a solidified opinion about the nature and purpose of American constitutionalism.

Every nation derives meaning and purpose from some unifying quality—an ethnic character, a common religion, a shared history. America is different. It was founded at a particular time, by a particular people, on the basis of particular *principles*.

At its birth, this nation justified its independence by asserting truths said to be "self-evident". Working from the great principle of human equality, the Declaration of Independence claimed a new basis of political legitimacy in the consent of those governed. A carefully written Constitution created an enduring framework of limited government based on the rule of law.

With this structure, America's Founders sought to establish religious liberty, provide for economic opportunity, secure national independence, and maintain a flourishing society of republican self-government—all in the name of the simple but radical idea of liberty.

In one sense, the American Revolution was about old ideas and inherited liberties that had been denied by British rulers.

But the past could tell them only so much. They had to make their own decisions as best they could, in light of their own circumstances and in keeping with the particular character of the American people. Their decisions, their circumstances and their character remind us that the American Founding was first and foremost the work of statesmanship.

We know our country through its principles and its ideas but also, perhaps even more so, through its actions and deeds. Which means that we know it best through its citizens,

especially its greatest citizens. And the noblest expression of America's ideas in action is George Washington, the father of the American regime.

In the end, America is a test to see whether free men can govern themselves. But it is not a test that, once taken and passed, is over and done. America remains an experiment, meaning that the validity of its claims has to be tested again, and again, and again.

It is in that spirit that we look to our Founding, and especially to Washington – not as a historical curiosity, but as a source of assurance and direction, of inspiration and guidance.

Washington's Character

We must begin by looking to Washington himself for an account of his thoughts and actions - and that has everything to do with the idea of character.

When the Continental Congress appointed Washington to be commander in chief in 1775, it was in part because he was from Virginia and arrived wearing his uniform, to be sure, but most of all because he displayed the qualities of character--courage, integrity, loyalty, dedication--that were needed to build and lead a republican army. Throughout that tumultuous period, his character was the compass that kept the other Founders on course and gave them reassurance and direction in their efforts. To give but one example of this influence: the vast powers of the presidency, as one delegate to the Constitutional Convention wrote, would not have been made as great "had not many of the members cast their eyes towards General Washington as president; and shaped their ideas of the powers to be given to a president, by their opinions of his virtue."[2]

That Washington is known for his good character is no accident. It was already evident in one of his earliest writings, a copybook of one hundred and ten "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation." These simple social maxims taught lessons of good manners on every topic from how to treat one's superiors and moderate one's own behavior ("Let your recreations be manful not sinful") to more significant expressions of civility ("Keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience").[3]

In his letters Washington constantly warns young correspondents of "the necessity of paying due attention to the moral virtues" and to avoid "scenes of vice and dissipation."[4] "A good moral character is the first essential of man," he wrote, and "the habits contracted at your age are generally indelible, and your conduct here may stamp your

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[2] *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, ed. Max Farrand (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1911), 3:302. The delegate was Pierce Butler.
[3] "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation," *George Washington: A Collection,* ed. W.B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988), 8, 13.
[4] Washington to George Steptoe Washington, March 23, 1789, in Writings of Washington, 30:248.

character through life." As a result, “You should endeavor not only to be *learned* but *virtuous*.”[5]

Washington's views on education reflect this concept as well, for he favored a solid and ethical general education. As the beginnings of education depended upon it, the end product of education was never unattached in Washington's mind from moral character. The “advantages of a finished education,” he noted, are both a “highly cultivated mind, and a proper sense of your duties to God and man.”[6]

Washington's own life is a good example of this advice, as he was constantly striving to control his own passions and habituate qualities of good character. As a young man, he displayed high ambitions and a desire for military glory. But for the mature Washington, what ultimately mattered was that his reputation be deserved; self-respect preceded public respect, and self-respect required good intentions and virtuous behavior. “I hope I shall always possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain (what I consider the most enviable of all titles) the character of an honest man,” he once told Hamilton, “as well as prove (what I desire to be considered in reality) that I am.”[7]

When Henry Lee urged him in 1788 to accept the presidency out of a regard for his own fame and reputation, Washington responded: “Though I prize, as I ought, the good opinion of my fellow citizens; yet, if I know myself, I would not seek or retain popularity at the expense of one social duty or moral virtue. . . . And certain I am, whensoever I shall be convinced the good of my country requires my reputation to be put in risque, regard for my own fame will not come in competition with an object of so much magnitude.”[8]

Character, as Washington understood it—and so thoroughly came to personify—was not merely the application of his own personal values. It was the key to his view of politics and the whole American project. Self-government was understood to be first about self-government. That required good laws and good habits of citizenship. Likewise, for the nation, independence, prosperity and happiness required the acquisition of national character: “[T]he first transactions of a nation, like those of an individual upon his first entrance into life, make the deepest impression,” Washington wrote just before he became president, “and are to form the leading traits in its character.”[9]

Where did Washington get this idea?

Over the course of his life Washington had perhaps six or seven years of education, in the forms of a tutor and a local school. His education was over by the time he was 15. He never learned a foreign language and never traveled abroad. Perhaps because he was self-conscious about his deficient education, he read avidly, from William Shakespeare to

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[5] Washington to George Steptoe Washington, December 5, 1790, in Writings of Washington, 30:163.
[6] Washington to George Washington Parke Custis, 19 December 1796, *Writings of Washington*, 35: 341.
[7] Washington to Alexander Hamilton, 28 August 1788, *Writings of Washington*, 30:67.
[8] Washington to Henry Lee, 22 September 1788, *Writings of Washington*, 30: 97.
[9] Washington to John Armstrong, 25 April 1788, *Writings of Washington*, 30: 465.

Adam Smith. He also read the major political works of the day, such as those of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams.

History and Classical Politics

More than anything, he--like the rest of the Founders--was steeped in history.

They all knew well their own history—which is to say British history. But they were very much shaped by ancient history as well. Two-thirds of the signers of the Declaration of Independence had studied the classics, half of them formally. At the Constitutional Convention, delegates regularly spoke—many gave lectures, sometimes several lasting hours—about the lessons to be drawn from ancient and modern history.

You see the influence of the classics in the pen names they took for their writings. The Anti-Federalists took the names Brutus and Cassius, assassins of Caesar, the tyrant. The Federalists countered with their own pseudonyms, the most famous being Publius—after Publius Valerius Publicola, the consul who played a key role in establishing the Roman republic. (There is also the lengthy (and delightful) private correspondence between John Adams and his wife, Abigail, who wrote under the names Lysander, the great Spartan general, and Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt.)

From ancient Greece, the Founders learned what to avoid in the formation of their own republic. In preparation for the Constitutional Convention, Madison wrote a lengthy report on the failures of the confederacies of ancient Greece. Alexander Hamilton voiced their collective assessment when he wrote in *Federalist* 9 about "the petty republics of Greece and Italy" that were "continually agitated" in "a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy."[10] Many of the constitutional ideas of the Founders were meant to be corrections to these problems of republican government.

There were instructive lessons as well, of course. The idea of separating the powers of government had beginnings in Aristotle's *Politics,* and the concept of balancing power among different public offices developed under the Romans. In Roman law, a special decree of the emperor was called a *"constitutio,"* from which we get the word "constitution".

They knew of the classical concepts of nature and natural law, especially from the stoic thinkers like the Roman statesman Cicero. Different things have different natures. Man has a distinguishing nature as well, with distinctive capacities and characteristics, prone to passion but capable of deliberation, judgment, and choice in his actions, and so is morally accountable.

Likewise, the argument for natural justice – of justice grounded in the nature of things. Washington wrote that he was convinced by "abler heads"--probably Patrick Henry and George Mason--that the British laws being enforced in America were "subversive of the

[10] Hamilton. "Federalist No. 9". *The Federalist Papers*. ed. Clinton Rossiter. (New York: Signet Classic, 2003), 66.

laws and constitution of Great Britain itself" but it was "an innate spirit of freedom" that led him to conclude "that the measures, which [the British] administration hath for some time been, and are now most violently pursuing, are repugnant to every principle of natural justice."[11]

Washington absorbed all of this, and more, particularly what the Greeks and Romans taught about the enduring importance of virtue and honor. Washington read some of the works of Cicero, and he especially liked Roger L'Estrange's translation of *The Morals of Seneca*, the Roman stoic philosopher. The work is a popularization of stoicism, presented in the Christian tradition. Its themes form a source list of Washington's moral axioms: virtue, happiness, wisdom, control of the passions, and moderation in all things.

His favorite theater production—he had it performed for his men several times during the Revolutionary War—was Joseph Addison's wildly popular play, *Cato: A Tragedy*, which portrays Cato's refusal to submit to the tyrannical rule of Julius Caesar. It was the source of many of his favorite phrases and quotations, as well as Patrick Henry's most famous line: "Give me liberty, or give me death." More than any other phrase or thought, Washington made Cato's best line <u>real</u>: "Tis not in mortals to command success, but we'll do more . . . we'll deserve it."

Perhaps the most significant manifestation of classical ideas in Washington and his fellow revolutionaries was that they understood themselves to be "founding" a new nation. Founding--the idea of giving a new city or state its laws and authoritative institutions--is the highest theme of politics, according to the ancients. It recalls the great lawgivers of ancient history, who founded Athens, Sparta, and Rome. More fundamentally, it implies that nations can be established or "founded," and that the act of founding permanently imprints an identity on the regime, shaping the character of the whole people and imparting a particular way of life on its citizens.

Unlike other nations, and suggestive of this larger purpose, America indeed had a founding, a deliberative moment in which Founding Fathers, who understood and intended what they were creating, established a new nation. Its ends are expressed in its founding documents—a Declaration of fundamental principles and a Constitution of supreme law. These founders understood themselves to be engaged in a momentous project to secure liberty for themselves and their posterity, and by proving it possible, to revive the heretofore failed cause of republican government. It was to be, if it succeeded, a *novus ordo seclorum*—a new order of the ages, to use the phrase from the classical Roman poet Virgil which is found on the reverse side of the Great Seal of the United States.

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[11] Washington believed that the acts of Parliament were "no longer governed by the principles of justice" and that the crisis had finally arrived when Americans must assert their rights "or submit to every imposition, that can be heaped upon us, till custom and use shall make us as tame and abject slaves, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway." Washington to Bryan Fairfax, August 24, 1774, in <u>Writings of Washington</u>, 3:232-4.

In the ancient world, there was usually one all-powerful lawgiver. The Constitutional Convention (the gathering of lawgivers who formed the governing Constitution) formally replaced that model in the American Founding. But it did not replace the need for one great man--the Cincinnatus figure who would lay down his plow to save the republic. And in America that man was Washington. "Be assured," as Monroe once reminded Jefferson, "his influence carried this government."[12]

In one of his most remarkable and revealing letters, written to the British historian Catherine Macaulay Graham, Washington observed that:

> The establishment of our new Government seemed to be the last great experiment for promoting human happiness by reasonable compact in civil Society. It was to be, in the first instance, in a considerable degree a government of accommodation as well as a government of Laws. Much was to be done by *prudence*, much by *conciliation*, much by *firmness*. Few who are not philosophical spectators can realize the difficult and delicate part which a man in my situation had to act. All see, and most admire, the glare which hovers round the external trappings of elevated office. To me there is nothing in it, beyond the lustre which may be reflected from its connection with a power of promoting human felicity. In our progress towards political happiness my station is new; and, if I may use the expression, I walk on untrodden ground.[13]

Human nature suggests the capacity for deliberation, decision and self-government. But the hardest task—the most human task—is in making the decisions. It is harder still in politics, which is about the application of principles to actual and imperfect circumstances. And so the preeminent virtue in political life, and the central cardinal virtue, is prudence. It is the occupation of prudence, keenly aware of the necessities of particular circumstances and the realities of practical outcomes, to advance principles by relating actions to their highest ends. And the key to making prudential decisions, knowing when to act and for what purpose, is a deep understanding of core principles and the character of one's conviction.

Thomas Jefferson once wrote that Washington's "mind was great and powerful" ... "though not so acute as that of Newton, Bacon or Locke; and as far as he saw, no judgment was ever sounder." Washington may not have been an abstract thinker—at least not of the type of Jefferson's favorite philosophers—but his judgment was both sound and sure. He followed his best judgment, often pursuing what was at the time a bold course – one that seems obvious only in hindsight. In short, he displayed the practical wisdom of statesmanship, guiding his people through the dangers of establishing their own freedom, remaining alive to the difficulties and challenges of founding a new nation. "Perhaps the strongest feature in his character was *prudence*," Jefferson continues, "never acting until

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[12] James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, 12 July 1788, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson,* ed. Julian P. Boyd et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 13: 352.
[13] Washington to Catherine Macaulay Graham, 9 January 1790, *Writings of Washington*, 30: 495–96.
[15] Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Walter Jones, January 2, 1814, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson. (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1984), 1318.

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." [15]

Washington was first and foremost a man of action. From 1775 onward, he personified the American Revolution and was the *de facto* leader of the colonial struggle. He was at every important intersection of the American Founding; his decisions were crucial to the success of the effort at every stage.

More often than not, it was *his* prudence, *his* conviction, and *his* firmness that allowed the American cause to carry the day. This is what he meant when he said he "walked on untrodden ground."

Perhaps the most well-known writing in classical political philosophy is Plato's *Republic*, about a hypothetical city where philosophers are kings. Actual politics, and the creation of actual regimes, is more difficult. And so, in the most practical Platonic dialogue, *The Laws*, it is observed that "lawgiving and the founding of cities is the most perfect test of manly virtue" and that "the natural genesis of the best regime, and laws to match" occur only when great power coincides with great prudence.[16]

Washington was a man of faith. His letters are filled with the religious language of his Anglican prayer book, and he uses distinct biblical imagery on several significant occasions—as when he expands on the Book of Micah at the end of his Circular Address of 1783.[17]

Washington was also a man of the moderate Enlightenment. He believed in individual freedom, in the pursuit of economic well-being, and in the material fruits of modern science, as firmly as any of the other Founders.

Yet he always had one foot firmly grounded in the classical world of virtue, and honor and statesmanship. To the extent that American constitutionalism is designed to produce a certain kind of citizen (which was clearly Washington's intention) that constitutionalism cannot be understood apart from the ancient account of politics.

This mix of the classical, religious, and liberal republican arguments can be seen most clearly in his First Inaugural Address, in which Washington focused on the moral character of those who would make the laws. He did so, he said, for three reasons:

> [T]here is no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness; between duty and advantage, between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy, and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity:

[16] Plato, The Laws of Plato, 708d and 712a, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 94, 97-8.
[17] Washington, Circular to the States, June 8, 1783, in Writings of Washington, 26:483-96.

> since we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the external rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained:
>
> and since 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.[18]

How Washington's thoughts and actions contributed to his grand project to form a people capable of governing themselves under the constitutional rule of law—"in command of their own fortunes", as he put it[19]--is the topic of my next lecture.

Barriers to Washington

Let me conclude this evening by considering three barriers that we must overcome to fully embrace Washington and the Founders.

The first is the problem of hindsight. We know what happened, and that can make things much less interesting. How often do we recall the events of December 1776 with the full confidence of knowing the inevitable outcome? It is almost impossible not to, but in doing so, we fail to fully realize and communicate how in the grimmest of days—Congress having fled the capitol, his highest officers questioning his generalship and his army near collapse and facing probable defeat—Washington grasped a tactical opportunity, achieved a strategic coup and, literally, saved the Revolution.

Rather than a sense of inevitability or momentum of history, we need to recapture the realities of contingency, chance and the unknown, as well as the choices and decisions of statesmen dealing with the course of human events. Whenever we do so, we realize that the real story is better than the myth.

A more difficult problem is the claim of progressive historians who criticize the American Founding on the grounds that there are no fixed truths—no objective or unchanging standards of right to guide politics. What might have been suitable for one century inevitably becomes outdated in another, making the past always inferior to the present, and the present inferior to the future. Yet Washington - as well Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton and Adams - was motivated by just such a claim of self-evident truths, applicable to all men and all times. We cannot understand them without understanding the permanent and universal nature of the ideas at the heart of their project. Especially when academic and elite opinion is overwhelmingly drawn to relativism, we must continue to hold these truths.

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[18] *Washington: A Collection*, 464–65; Washington, First Inaugural Address, 30 April 1789, *Writings of Washington*, 30: 291–96.
[19] Washington, "The Farewell Address," in Writings of Washington, 35:237.
[21] Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Walter Jones, January 2, 1814, Thomas Jefferson: Writings, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 1318-9.

The last barrier is particular to Washington's role. If there are no transcendent ideas, there are no virtues or transcendent qualities to aspire to. If there is no virtue and vice then there are no heroes and villains, no momentous events and no human excellence. As a result, history is diminished, and so are we. When this idea of smallness reduces morally independent, self-governing citizens to passive subjects, as Tocqueville famously warned, it is degrading and can lead to despotism as we come to be increasingly ruled by others.

The solution to these problems is very simple.

We don't need to remake America, or discover new and untested principles. The change we need is not the rejection of America's first principles, but a grand renewal of these permanent truths about man, politics, and liberty—the foundational principles and constitutional wisdom that are the roots of America's greatness.

Nor does this mean going back to the eighteenth century, or any other time, for that matter. The question is not, "What Would Washington Do?" but what will *we* do as we go forward with these principles as our standard. Recovering our principles means *living* them again, as a people, and as a nation.

Only with this sure foundation can we go forward, addressing the great challenges before us and continuing to secure the blessings of liberty.

Jefferson's letter about Washington from which I quoted earlier ends with this passage:

> His integrity was pure, his justice the most inflexible I have ever known, no motives of interest or consanguinity, of friendship or hatred, being able to bias his decision. He was, indeed, in every sense of the words, a wise, a good, and a great man.[…] It may truly be said, that never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great, and to place him in the same constellation with whatever worthies have merited from man an everlasting remembrance.[21]

George Washington is the rare example of what Aristotle called the great-souled man, reflecting a complete and well-ordered character, where ambition is subordinate to honor, and honor serves duty.

But there is a very important sense in which Washington departed from the ancient model. Most of the classical examples – not just Caesar, but Cincinnatus as well – were dictators, after all. Here is the difference: Washington deserved honors, but he did not take them. Twice during the revolution, Washington was given absolute power by Congress, and both times he gave it back.

Then, at Newburgh, in an act virtually unknown in the annals of history, Washington rejected the call of some of his officers to use military force to settle the political questions at hand.

What was said there by Washington is even more significant than his actions. He argued that republican government – self-rule – liberty -- is noble, and that what some of his officers proposed was below them.

In a passage worthy of Shakespeare, this is how he closed his case against the possible mutiny:

> By thus determining, and thus acting, . . .You will defeat the insidious designs of our Enemies, who are compelled to resort from open force to secret Artifice. You will give one more distinguished proof of unexampled patriotism and patient virtue, rising superior to the pressure of the most complicated sufferings; And you will, by the dignity of your Conduct, afford occasion for Posterity to say, when speaking of the glorious example you have exhibited to Mankind, "had this day been wanting, the World had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining."[22]

George Washington was truly great, but it is not that we are below him as much as that he elevates us. In his words and deeds, and the whole movement of his statesmanship, he constantly calls to mind the possibility of democratic greatness -- pointing soldiers, then citizens, and now us, to something higher: to principle, to virtue, to honor, and to justice. He reminds us, by showing us, that democratic politics—based on a principled recognition that we are all equal—can still inspire citizens to the highest of human achievements.

The magnificent story of America, and Washington's statesmanship, will be told again and again by ever-greater writers, and will never fail to capture the imagination of any and all who will hear it.

The truths of liberty are still self-evident, enshrined in our documents because they are etched in our very being.

And Washington still guides us, teaches us, inspires us, and raises the horizons of free citizens to greatness.

It is our task, as it is the task of every generation, to vindicate the American experiment, exemplify the nobility of self-government, and prove that we are worthy of tending and passing along to those who will follow, the sacred fire of liberty, which still remains where Washington placed it, in hands of the American people, passed down to us by our fathers.

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[22] Washington, Speech to the Officers of the Army (Newburgh Address), March 15, 1783, in Writings of Washington, 26:227.

including *A Sacred Union of Citizens: Washington's Farewell Address and the American Character*, *Patriot Sage: George Washington and the American Political Tradition* and *The Founders' Almanac: A Practical Guide to the Notable Events, Greatest Leaders & Most Eloquent Words of the American Founding*. He is Executive Editor of *The Heritage Guide to the Constitution*, a clause-by-clause analysis of the United States Constitution. He has taught at George Mason University, the Catholic University of America and Claremont McKenna College, and is a fellow of the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy and an adjunct fellow of the Kirby Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship at Hillsdale College.