

Richard Gilder Distinguished Lecture  
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New-York Historical Society  
February 5, 2008

I am grateful to Roger Hertog and the Board of the Historical Society, to Louise Mirrer, our president, for the opportunity to present these Gilder lectures for 2008. And I am particularly grateful to the man in whose honor these talks are given, Dick Gilder, who with Lewis Lehrman and others has inspired and sustained, with passion and generosity both, the urgent mission of placing the study of history at the direct service of the public weal: illuminating our past so that we may more successfully, and hopefully, make sense of our crowding present and future. There is no truism more homely than this: and yet none is uttered with less conviction by the majority of academic historians. For most it is enough to pursue history for

the satisfaction they derive "from a disciplined attempt to reconstruct the past," as Arthur Schlesinger wrote, or, in the words of a great French historian, "for the joy we find in learning singular things." For public persons these rewards, however gratifying, are not enough. We need learn, and learn to purpose, from the past.

I am troubled by the remoteness of the American military establishment from the nation it represents and whose interests its government calls upon it to advance. I will be talking in these lectures about three republican generals – republican with a small "r," of course – three soldiers each of whom commanded the American army in the most consequential war of his time and century: George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and George C. Marshall, each of whom was a careful student of the nature of an army appropriate to our country – in the case of

Washington, to the colonies whose continental forces represented their necessary and often begrudged contributions to a common military instrument. I will be talking about the character and genius of each man, "genius" in this wise meaning a profound aptness for the duties he was given to discharge. I will also be considering our country's profound ambivalence, through our history, towards the character, and sometimes even the necessity, of an American military establishment.

Two final points by way of preface. When I say, "the remoteness of the American military establishment," in 2008, I mean its distance, its lack of plangency, from and to most of us. Since January 1st 1973 recruits our country's armed forces have comprised volunteers only. None of our children is obliged to serve. Few of the famous ancient universities for which our children and grandchildren seek to strengthen their claims on

admission – few of these retain detachments of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, or greet a senior's announcement that he will accept a commission in the Marines with anything less than stupefaction. We admire what we know and see of the quality of our soldiers' service, of their bravery and patriotism, of the skill and devotion of those who lead them. Again, however, our admiration, unqualified, is called forth only when some headline reminds us to acknowledge it – that or a politician's citation.

Lord Macaulay wrote that he proposed to write the history of his country from the earliest times down to a date within the memory of men still living. The last of the three military leaders we will consider died in 1959, but hundreds of thousands of those he led are still, all in their eighties and nineties, still living: their memory of their service in the Second

World War is fresh and vivid. There were sixteen millions of them, women and men, altogether (and we were then a country with but 3/8s our population today). One of their generals, one of the two most senior American officers killed in that war, was the son of an important Civil War general: not the grandson or great-grandson, but the son: Simon Boliver Buckner, Jr., killed on Okinawa in 1945 – son of the man who surrendered Fort Donelson, Kentucky, to Ulysses Grant in 1862. The generation of Franklin Roosevelt, Douglas MacArthur, and George Marshall, all born within two years of each other, was a generation taught by men still young – who had fought under Lee and Jackson, Sherman and Grant.

(only 80 years later men stood uncovered at the Garrison, NY, train station)

And in their turn, Lee and his contemporaries were children, or

close to it, of the Revolution – Lee of course the son of a hero of that war. The tight linkages between and among these generations, as we will see, are important to our understanding of American military leadership, of the nature and role of an army in a democratic republic, and of the influence of history and of our most distinguished soldiers on leadership in 2008.

No public ambivalence has been greater in our history than our attitude towards American arms – arms, that is, meaning an Army and Navy, the need or absence of need, for them; whether they must be large or small, composed of professionals or citizen-soldiers, of volunteers or conscripts, maintained during time of peace or not. On the one hand there is the counsel of G. Washington, counsel that reflects profoundly his own service as well as his study: if you wish for peace, prepare for war; on the other – and here is a choice illustration, that of William Jennings

Bryan, Woodrow Wilson's first Secretary of State (1913- 1915):  
should the need truly arise and the call go out, a million  
American men would spring to arms overnight. This  
ambivalence is reflected in a hundred ways, several of them of  
profound consequence: the country's astounding  
unpreparedness for war in 1898, in 1917, in 1940, in 1950. In  
each case victory or, in the case of Korea an outcome acceptable  
to the administration, was attained; each was followed by a time  
of – take your pick – retrenchment, a peace dividend, the end of  
a draft, the profound shrinkage of our military establishment.

(GCM anecdote re en route Moscow)

And each was followed, also, by serious public debate, and  
debate within the Army: who should serve, if there is a need for  
service? Who is to be chosen, and how? Washington famously  
wrote that "It may be laid down as a primary position, and the

basis of our system, that every Citizen who enjoys the protection of a free government, owes not only a proportion of his property, but even of his personal services in the defence of it." (\*\*\*) . In 17th Century Maryland, the elective franchise was not awarded those who were not, or had not been, members of the militia. And a hardy perennial, still heard in various forms and shapes, and in language increasingly unconvincing, is the expressed need for – and this is the way it is always pronounced, nowadays – "some form of national service." All nod. But of course. But this is to public policy what a velleity is to human volition: a nice impulse, an idle notion, a daydream. It never happens. In this culture – a culture whose substance and lineaments have not changed all that much – the American military establishment is an acknowledged necessity – following Washington's idea, in some form, we have to have an

army; but for many it remains a begrudged necessity, and for this reason: the continuing sense that having an army, maintaining armed forces, tends to engender, to encourage, to excite, their use. In the 1970 – 1972 debate over whether there should be an All-Volunteer Army, this was an argument heard often. The kinds of people who would volunteer would represent a cross-section of young men who would be joining because they actually liked fighting, because they were ... predisposed to violence.

So all three men faced squarely a continuing challenge: how to attract, recruit, train, lead, and sustain an efficient force of soldiers which would serve, perhaps for an indeterminate time, a country which has always been wary of soldiers, begrudging of military expenditure, and always skeptical of those who advance arguments in behalf of going to war. Elihu

Root and Henry Stimson, like Henry Knox and John C. Calhoun, were called Secretaries of War. Since 1947 their successors have been called Secretaries of Defense. It is a telling change in label. Indeed as late as the 1960s the popular culture of the Cold War was distinguished by books and movies about powerful military men turning against their constituted, elected leadership of the country.

I should say something of the two republican generals whom we will be considering in April and in June, so that you may form early impressions of the qualities of character and mind that these men seemed to share.

A month ago a distinguished university classicist, now teaching Caesar's *Commentaries* to undergraduates, remarked that only the *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* approached them as masterpieces of military writing – of military history as

written by those who served in the wars they described. Caesar, you remember from school days, wrote a lucid, engaging prose, brisk narrative aimed at making its author seem as congenial as admirable. Grant's *Memoirs*, mostly written within a mile of where we gather tonight, were recognized immediately as unexampled military narrative: they were lucid, disinterested, unselfconsciously honest, unfailingly magnanimous in their judgements of adversaries. Sophisticated readers were astounded by their quality – among them Matthew Arnold, Grant's exact contemporary – born 1822 – the great literary critic of the age. Astounded: this notoriously taciturn soldier and president, the most uneasy of public speakers, whose formal utterances were tricked out in awkward bureaucratese – was a great writer.

Grant baffled contemporaries as he has baffled biographers.

He was anxious that we know as little about him as possible.

Like Churchill's *Marlborough* he was the product of a childhood essentially unhappy – a childhood that, as we will see, had much to do with his generalship later on. His response to a world that judged him harshly, that often ridiculed him when it bothered even to notice him – his response was to adopt a protective coloration – the coloration of silence, blandness, the practice, soon a habit, of keeping back in crowds and among friends, but of cultivating the kinds of skills learned in solitude in a frontier boyhood. His father was the town braggart; his strange name was contracted to "Useless"; when the little town of Georgetown, Ohio, learned that he had been appointed to West Point, it predicted certain failure.

We will consider his generalship at length. For now it is enough to say that, in his solitude he had silently developed the

self-reliance, tenacity of purpose, schooled indifference to ridicule, and the habit of watchfulness and silent appraisal (of men and terrain) that, when, by accident, he was given his chance, he stunned those around him by, simply, how able he was. Like Washington he united what Clausewitz called the essence of military genius: "a harmonious association of powers" – courage of the kind that is undaunted by the heaviest responsibilities, the mental eye of perception, resolution that removes the torments of doubt – resolution which belongs to a strong mind rather than a brilliant one." ( ). We notice also that, as Grant writes in his *Memoirs*, the ideal age for a general is the early forties: George Washington was forty-three when he took command of continental forces in Boston, in 1775.

Finally, George Marshall. Two months ago you might have

heard David McCullough tell a large audience that he had asked a seminar at a college whose name it would be ungracious of me to mention, who George Marshall was. No one knew. In 2006 or 2007, fifty years after his death, no one knew who he was. It was in a way an ironic reward and vindication: Marshall shunned praise, honors, public acclaim or credit. He would not permit himself to be decorated during the Second World War. In lectures on history he would apologize for introducing an example drawn from experience of which he had what we would call "personal" knowledge. He insisted his funeral be in the little chapel at Fort Myer and that there be no eulogy. Like George Washington he was an artifact of his own conscious manufacture and lifelong superintendence; like Ulysses Grant he made his way forward in a certain anodyne guise, a carapace of devotion to principle and to duty that did not excite envy,

censure, jealousy, or criticism. In this, like Washington, he exhibited the most profound understanding of the nature of supreme military command in the American republic polity – in a commercial democracy profoundly unmilitary in its instincts. If there is no test more searching than leading a democracy in war – we think of Lincoln, of Churchill, or Clemenceau, there is none more exacting than preparing and commanding its armies: particularly, and peculiarly, in building and preparing them for what you, as their military leader, know is surely coming, but which your country, in a long fret of profound cognitive dissonance, refuses to acknowledge even as it senses its inevitability. Fifteen years later, when awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and asked what he considered his most useful contribution to peace, Marshall did not hesitate: what I tried to do in 1939 and 1940 to prepare the country for the war that I

believed was inevitable. That was the hardest thing I had to do.

On the day he made his famous speech at Harvard, in 1947, announcing his proposal that his country lend its assistance to European recovery, the president of the University cited him as a soldier statesman who brooks comparison with only one other in our history. Washington is the first of our subjects.

The hardest thing George Washington had to do was to build and lead an army, which he did for more than eight years continuous service of which most was given to fighting against the best-trained, best-equipped and – among junior officers and NCOs – best led army in the world. The British Army. It was sustained and serviced by the most formidable navy in existence, and the government that supported its campaigns, however short-sighted and obstinate, did in fact support its service for six full years – this, against the American

expectation that after early American victories in the field, their enemies would be recalled and the colonies allowed to go their own way quietly.

It was Washington's largest achievement to have kept the Army together, through force of character and allegiance to the mission that, he knew, must not falter, all the while, with an almost ostentatious deference to constituted authority – to Congress – laboring to secure the sustenance his soldiers required. Alone among American generals he had spent more than fifteen years as a legislator in the Virginia House of Burgesses; he both understood and even revered legislative superiority in wartime: he was commander-in-chief in the field, but his masters were members of Congress. He was a republican general. By 1778, as Richard Brookhiser wrote, though he had lost five of the seven battles he had fought, he

had managed to solve the strategic problem .... he had not won the war, (but) he had made it unwinnable for the enemy." (\*\*\*)

). But this prospective victory depended entirely on sustaining an army representing a coalition deeply reluctant to do those things necessary for its survival.

Washington and James Madison understood the conundrum the colonies and later the nation must engage – a conundrum being a problem without an obvious or permanent solution, "A standing force," wrote Madison, "... is a dangerous, at the same time it may be, a necessary provision." (Federalist 41 \_\_\_\_\_).

Washington believed this precisely but pointed out that:

"Regular troops alone are equal to the exigencies of modern war, as well for defence as offence ... no Militia will ever acquire the habits necessary for a regular force ... the firmness requisite for the real business of fighting is only to be attained

by a constant course of discipline and service." (\*\*\*) Fitzpatrick  
XX ) Samuel Adams passionately expressed the other  
dimension of the conundrum: "a standing army, however  
necessary it may be at some times, is always dangerous to the  
liberties of the people. Soldiers are apt to consider themselves  
as a body distinct from the rest of the citizens. They have their  
arms always in their hands ... They soon become attached to  
their officers and disposed to yield implicit obedience to their  
commands ..." (\*\*\*) td in Weigley HUSA p 75).

The answer, Adams would have argued, was a  
properly-trained militia of citizens who would follow a "way of  
meeting danger voluntarily, with an easy mind, instead of  
laborious training, with natural rather than state-induced  
courage. We do not have to spend our time practicing to meet  
sufferings which are still in the future ... when they are actually

upon us we (will) show ourselves just as brave as the others who are always in strict training." (\*\*\*) Thucydides The Peloponnesian War, II, 34).

"All of the public men of (Washington's) generation appear to have absorbed the same maxims of conduct, to have studied the same texts ... All of them knew Plutarch and Thucydides and Tacitus." (\*\*\*) Commager: "Leadership in Eighteenth Century America and Today," Daedalus, Fall, 1961, p 659). What I have just quoted, of course, is from the Funeral Oration of Pericles in Book II of Thucydides. It is in the work of adjusting the powerful claims of military necessity to those of a primordial fear of professionalized, continuing military forces – standing armies –that Washington and his successors, soldiers and politicians, generals and presidents, and legislators have always labored to reconcile.

After Yorktown and the Treaty of Paris, (1781, 1783), the continental army was reduced to some eighty men, assigned to guard two military arsenals; the number was adjusted moderately upward to around 800, a single regiment, in 1784. Here was the establishment of an American pattern, laid and confirmed, an Army dismissed with thanks but little else, and only the thinnest remnant retained on a federal roster.

In September 1777 a General Order from Washington's Headquarters repeated a theme of ancient coinage and continuing \_\_\_\_\_ "The eyes of all America, and of Europe, are turned upon us, as on those on whom the event of the war is to be determined." (quoted in Ellis p 102). Like John Adams, Washington was moved always to remember his foredebt, and his generation's to posterity, whom rays of ravishing light and glory will favor if he is faithful to his charge.

At Newburgh, in 1783, finally, he gave tongue to the philosophy which had sustained him through the eight years of leadership of the Army. He told his officers, "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."

After the British took ship, leaving Boston for New York, by way of Nova Scotia, and where they would be reinforced by the largest expeditionary army the British had ever sent out – to a total of 32,000, and where, over months they would be out-witted, outfought, outflanked, and out-generalled, Washington and the army, now reduced to less than four thousand, moved diagonally south across central New Jersey,

cross to the west bank of the Delaware, and waited for an opportunity to surprise an enemy detachment. This they did, with Washington leading from the front (though not exactly as Emmanuel Leutze painted him – with Lieut James Monroe alongside him), on Christmas day, 1776. They routed the Hessians at Trenton; fought another successful action at Princeton, and headed South again. These were heartening victories; they remind us of Washington's pugnacity and aggressiveness – he was the age of a modern lieutenant colonel, a fighting battalion commander who quite deliberately exposes his person to an enemy whom he knows will shoot at him. Soon thereafter, however, necessity compelled the Fabian strategy I have described. What else could the Army do? Not only were the forces arrayed against him overwhelming in size, equipment, and provisions; with the British Navy as transport, they could

land and fight wherever they chose. To "try to defend the whole revolutionary seacoast would place Washington in a predicament" one of his generals later describe in a vivid simile: 'I am like a Dog in a dancing school. I know not where to turn myself, to fix myself ... (against an enemy) who can fly in an instant to any spot they choose on canvas wings ...'"  
quoted in Weigley p 12 AWW.

But Washington's largest problem was less strategic than logistical. He was indeed commander of the Continental army, but it was an army cobbled together from detachments of militia of the various colonies, whose terms of enlistment varied widely, from whose ranks desertion was continuous, who were paid infrequently by the Continental Congress, who were poorly-armed, and who had had no military training save what they had picked up along the way – or what, finally,

Washington's famous drill master, Baron von Steuben, was able to instill in them.

Washington's strategy like his generalship was "shaped by military poverty." (\*\*\*) Weigley, AWW, p. 3). He acknowledged as much, each in the war, after the American disasters in New York, in a letter dated September 8th, 1776: "... on our side the war should be defensive ... we should on all occasions avoid a general action, or put anything to the Risque, unless compelled by a necessity." He carried out, that is to say, a Fabian strategy, so-named for the Roman general who, in refusing to allow his army to fight Hannibal's overwhelming force in a general engagement, but forcing Hannibal into a frustrating campaign of pursuit, movement, and waste, was able finally to achieve a strategic victory for Rome. Military writers call this the "strategic defensive," and this was Washington's

strategy as it was that of, for example, the North Vietnamese from 1965 to 1973, the southern Confederacy, for most of the Civil War, and, for planning purposes only, the Japanese Empire after the early offensives December 1941 and January 1942.

Washington believed he did not have to win a battle without a morrow, as the British say. He had only to persuade the enemy that her costs would be prohibitive; intelligent members of Parliament will either bring down the ministry or persuade it to change its policy – the British army will acknowledge defeat and leave North America.

A Fabian strategy is profoundly uncongenial to the American temperament. War, as Grant and Pershing and Marshall and their countrymen believed, must range their country on the side of the Right, it must defeat our enemy promptly, so that the soldiers needed to prosecute such wars can return to the quiet

pursuits of blameless domesticity. Averell Harriman said in 1944 that all American soldiers want is to get home as soon as they can, drink coke, and go to the movies; and their leader, Marshall observed, "democracies cannot fight seven-year wars." (\*\*\*) ).

No doubt Washington had read Plutarch, the most popular writer of the most civilization of all time – to 18th Century Americans: *Rome*. Like his contemporaries George Mason and John Adams, Washington found in Plutarch's miniature biographies of noble Romans exemplary moral sustenance for his own travails; and like all the leaders of the revolutionary generation he studied the classics with a conscious view to emulation: we study heroes to get into our own bones the elements of heroic behavior. A friend asked me whether Washington figured out he must fight a Fabian strategy on his

own, or whether he learned it from Fabius. We imagine the former; we don't know – but there is another element in Plutarch's essay of larger value in our consideration of Washington's generalship. A Fabian strategy was uncongenial to a young soldier of Washington's temperament. His early campaigns, fighting against the French and their native American allies, were distinguished by an almost foolish aggressiveness, by the prosecution of unripe battles and daredevil risks. Now he understood taking such risks was foolhardy, destructive, calamitous. But a Fabian strategy exposed him to the imputation of timidity, of carrying out a strategy at best passive, and certainly dispiriting. If recruiting went up sharply after the heartening early victories at Trenton and Princeton, following Washington's Crossing (Christmas Day, 1776), it would, and did, fall sharply after defeats and

campaigns without result other than disease, famine, desertion.

Washington, like Marshall and like Ulysses Grant, was easy and confident in his conscience: right action is the most formidable of armor – but it is reliable as armor only if worn by a leader like Washington. He responded to critics as Plutarch's Fibs did: "I should be more faint-hearted than they make me, if, through fear of idle reproaches, I should abandon my convictions. It is no inglorious thing to have fear for the safety of your country, but to be turned from one's course by men's opinions, by blame, and by misrepresentation, shows a man unfit to hold an office such as this ..." (Mod Library edn.)

Plt: AD 45 – AD 120.

On campaign or during times of settled occupation during the war, Washington surrounded himself with very young men, almost none of them regular soldiers most given nominal

commissions and set to work at the tiresome business of military administration and correspondence. They constituted Washington's military family, the most famous among them of course Hamilton and Lafayette: he was easy and affable among them, and used them also in much the same way Eisenhower's colleague Bernard Montgomery used his aides during the war in Europe – as sources of information, as observers, liaison officers. Like Montgomery he favored the able and well-educated. Washington was an autodidact, marvelously self-educated but in his heart of hearts diffident and unsure in his knowledge of what he believed appropriate to his station. He worried about his prose composition, and about the eloquence of his speeches. His young staff officers – Hamilton again being an excellent example, were desperate to get field commands. Washington tended to deny them for a time, and then give way.

Washington like Marshall, another Virginian from the Northern Neck, was not looking to advance people like Washington; he was looking for officers who could do best what needed doing; officers who would not only diagnose, but also prescribe. The triumvirate of Baron von Steuben, Nathaniel Greene, and Henry Knox, all characters of eccentric address and talent, were to Washington what generals who served Grant and Marshall became for Washington, what Sheridan was to Grant, and George Patton or Joseph Sitwell became for Marshall: in Washington's panoply of generals: a Prussian disciplinarian of fraudulent genealogy, a Rhode Island Quaker and foundry man who taught himself Greek and Latin, and a self-taught Boston bookseller – Knox, in whom Washington's trust was so profound that he made him commander of the whole Southern Department in 1780.

What finally can we say and think that has not been said and thought about George Washington, the Washington who commanded the armies of the united provinces, the united colonies, and who labored to draw from their Congress the things necessary to prosecute a successful war. Remember again the overwhelming difficulty: though a “remarkable and unexpected union had taken place ... a spirit of liberty and patriotism that animated all degrees and denominations of men,” as Madison said (Gordon S. Wood C.A.R. p 102) the union was far more spiritual than political. The colonies had not coalesced. “My country” to Jefferson meant Virginia; John Adams talked of sending an embassy to Philadelphia. Benjamin Rush could write that “every man’s ... talents and time all belong to his country ...” but his country was not yet the United States.

We are obliged to consider the nature of his being and accomplishment and in some sense to labor and emulate what we cherish in them. His contemporaries did, almost universally. He was not venerable to them in 1777. He as an apotheosis of what a leader, hero-patriot might be, and embodiment of public virtue and civic wisdom, both as head of the Army and, later, as President: a summa of the things his age, in the North American colonies, had learned to revere – the age, in Europe, almost exactly, of Sir Joshua Reynolds and Wolfgang Mozart. In our egalitarian age, like Matthew Arnold's, a time of doubts, distractions, and fears – and of irony, we obey unignorable counsels to first find flaws, errors, and sins in those we held up as heroes from earlier times. We come perilously close to the corroding cynicism that ruins useful judgement. Civic wisdom whose elements it seems to me are unchanging in our

democracy: intellectual integrity, prudence, judgement, farsightedness, immunity to the solicitations of impulse. It is not reliably correlated to cleverness or wit or even verbal facility. In Washington the essence of his achievement seems in small measure providential or serendipitous: early challenges of the kind that sometimes combine to engender moral hardihood and courage, dutifulness, a rigid sense of honor, prolonged exposure to the nature and proclivities of political persons, and determination to earn and maintain what his time called “character.” His greatest biographer Douglas Softball Freeman, in summation of his achievement as builder and sustainer and leader of the American Army wrote that “he had to wait and plan and labor at the endless task of trying to maintain a strong army ... living at the feeble foundation of public languor.” Freeman quoted Washington himself: “I always walked in a

straight line.”