

Robert K. Landers

## Spurious George?

### Washington

A Life

Ron Chernow

Penguin Press, \$40, 904 pp.

We take it for granted nowadays that modern American political leaders, with their retinues of consultants and pollsters, will closely attend to their public images and vigorously promote them. A half-century ago, when historian Daniel Boorstin's *The Image* (1961) was published, that was not so obvious. Long before the personal computer, the widespread digitization of words and images, and the Internet, Boorstin showed how technological advances in printing, photography, and communications over the previous half-century had prompted political leaders and other newsmakers to stage image-enhancing events that were "somehow not quite real." Most political speeches, press conferences, and interviews, Boorstin wrote, were "pseudo-events." Penetrating observers such as Richard Rovere found the thesis persuasive. Writing in the *New Yorker* in 1963, Rovere called President John F. Kennedy's triumphal European tour that summer "a super-pseudo-event" (though he allowed that



genuine events, such as JFK's "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech, could "occur in the midst of pseudo-events").

Now we learn from Ron Chernow's magnificent biography *Washington* that the putative unreality goes back much further than Boorstin indicated: that George Washington himself cultivated his public image and engaged in what could be construed as pseudo-events. Even as a young man, ambitious and eager to win others' approval, Washington "tended his image with extreme care."

The "father of his country" (as a 1778 almanac described him) may not have used the term *image*—more likely, he thought of his *reputation*, or later, *fame*. But there is no doubt that he acquired a public image, and after he became commander in chief of the Continental Army, it went beyond reputation and then even beyond fame, into the realm of myth.

"With the possible exception of the Continental Congress, the Continental Army was the purest expression of the new, still inchoate country," Chernow observes. "Washington personified that army and was therefore the main unifying figure in the war." After the American victory in the war, his astonishing renunciation of power, his reassuring role in the Constitutional Convention, and his ostensibly reluctant acceptance of the presidency, his mythic image served as a vital pillar of the new government. And the lengthy tours President Washington made of the northern states in 1789 and the southern ones in 1791 might well be put down as pseudo-events—except that (like Kennedy's European trip) they had a serious purpose: Washington wanted to monitor public opinion and to let people see their renowned leader, as a way of strengthening national unity and support for the government.

Chernow's *Washington* is much more than manipulated myth, of course. Indeed, making adroit and imaginative use

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of the massive edition (sixty volumes) of Washington's letters and diaries that scholars at the University of Virginia have produced in recent decades, the author of the highly praised *Alexander Hamilton* (2004) gives us a Washington who is recognizably human, as well as truly great. James Thomas Flexner and his four-volume *George Washington* (1965–72) were also lauded for making “the statue come alive” (as Dumas Malone, the distinguished biographer of Thomas Jefferson, put it). But Chernow is the better writer, has the advantage of the recent scholarship, and accomplishes the feat in less than half as many pages.

Beneath the statue's habitual reserve, Chernow shows, powerful emotions stirred; and behind his frequent silences, a strong intelligence was at work. His forte was “prolonged deliberation and slow, mature decisions.” He was no intellectual and not as educated as other leading Founders, but he was “a quick study” who rapidly absorbed the political ideas that made his “splendid wrath” against the Crown more than just the sum of his accumulated petty grievances.

Washington became known for his courage as a soldier early on, displaying in the Ohio Country frontier in 1754 the preternatural bravery under fire that he would always exhibit. But his nascent reputation as a twenty-two-year-old British colonial officer might have been less for courage than for military ineptitude or even worse, had it not been for his and his superiors' interest in glossing over his mistakes.

His force's rash preemptive “massacre” of a small French detachment that included a diplomatic envoy bearing an ultimatum for the British sparked the French and Indian War. He claimed (implausibly, Chernow says) that the French fired first, and blamed his Indian allies for the atrocities committed. The French sought to retaliate, and his next engagement, at the ill-situated Fort Necessity in southwestern Pennsylvania, turned into a one-sided French victory, complete with surrender. Washington tried to make the battle seem more like a draw by vastly exaggerating enemy casualties. But the

surrender papers he signed acknowledged the “assassination” of the French envoy, thus giving the French a major propaganda victory in the war that officially had yet to begin. “The Fort Necessity debacle pointed up Washington's inexperience,” Chernow notes.

At Fort Necessity, the regular British soldiers “had stood steadfast under French fire, while the ranks of [Washington's] own Virginia Regiment had broken and dived for cover.” The next year, however, with Washington serving under Major General Edward Braddock, that pattern was reversed: the unorthodox warfare practiced by the French and their Indian allies caused the vaunted British regulars to panic, while the Virginians fought courageously. Washington emerged from Braddock's crushing defeat not only with “an indelible image as a fearless young soldier,” Chernow writes, but also with “a new awareness of the futility of European military practices on American soil”—which later led him and other colonists to the audacious belief “that a ramshackle army of rough frontiersmen could defeat the world's foremost military machine.”

As commander in chief of the Continental Army for eight and a half years, Washington lost more battles than he won and “botched several through strategic blunders,” Chernow observes. His “greatness as a general” lay elsewhere: “in his prolonged sustenance of his makeshift army. He had done something unprecedented by cobbling together a creditable fighting force from the poor, the young, the black, and the downtrodden, and he had done it in the face of unprecedented political obstacles.”

Washington at first refused to allow free blacks to serve in the Continental Army, a reluctance Chernow attributes to the slaveholder's fear of revolt. “But Washington had to reckon with the tolerance of his New England men, who had accepted blacks as stout-hearted comrades at Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill.” And after Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor of Virginia, announced in November 1775 that slaves

who fled their rebel masters could join his Royal Ethiopian Regiment, Washington also had to reckon with the possibility that the free blacks he was rejecting for his army might defect to the enemy. Moreover, he was desperately in need of able-bodied men. So Washington reversed course and let free blacks enlist. “It was a watershed moment in American history,” Chernow says, “opening the way for approximately five thousand blacks to serve in the Continental Army.”

The war served as a “political schoolroom” for Washington, providing by negation important lessons about the nation's need for professional soldiers, experienced congressmen, and a strong central government. He took those lessons with him into the Constitutional Convention and then the presidency.

He made the presidency into a powerful office, Chernow notes, and showed “a disbelieving world that republican government could prosper without being spineless or disorderly or reverting to authoritarian rule.” His “catalog of accomplishments” as president “was simply breathtaking.” And “in surrendering the presidency after two terms and overseeing a smooth transition of power,” he proved “that the president was merely the servant of the people.”

Like the country he led, Washington was profoundly conflicted about slavery. He had been “a hard-driving slave master,” but at the end of his life, he did something that no other Founding Father in Virginia did: He freed all his slaves (who made up less than half of Mount Vernon's). It is moving to read of him making arrangements in his will for the young among them to be educated and for the aged and sick to be assisted. “No less than in life,” Chernow writes, “he craved the world's posthumous approval and was eager ‘that no reproach may attach itself to me when I have taken my departure for the land of spirits.’” He may have been concerned with his posthumous image, but this final act was certainly no pseudo-event. ■

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