

# All the President's Men

## Washington's Circle

By David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler  
(Random House, 536 pages, \$35)

Virginia neighbors George Washington and George Mason were close friends for more than three decades. They had both taken part in the Constitutional Convention in 1787—but Mason, who had wanted a strong bill of rights, had left the convention in disgust and fought hard, though unsuccessfully, against Virginia's ratification of the Constitution. In the end, Mason said he would support the new government, but Washington never forgave him. Mason couldn't fathom why—or could he?

In "Washington's Circle," a fine, readable history of the first presidency, David and Jeanne Heidler note that Washington forgave other men, some of them close friends, for opposing the Constitution. The Heidlrs speculate that there may have been another reason for his break with his neighbor. A learned autodidact, Mason had a vast knowledge of John Locke and the political theories of the Scottish Enlightenment, and he sometimes resorted to sarcasm when dealing with less nimble minds. Had he, in private conversation or a letter lost to history, insisted

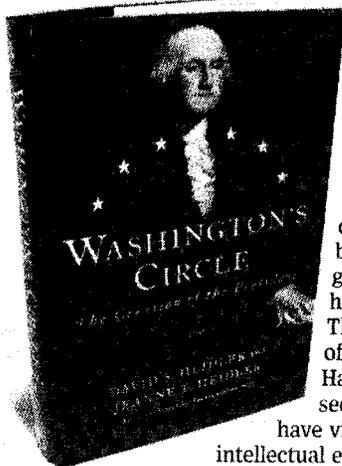
on his superior knowledge to the president-to-be, leading Washington to think that his friend regarded him as stupid? Washington was quite touchy about any such suggestion.

Washington wasn't dense, but he wasn't brilliant either. The two genuinely brilliant men in his original cabinet—Thomas Jefferson (secretary of state) and Alexander Hamilton (Treasury secretary)—could hardly

have viewed their chief as their intellectual equal. That didn't

necessarily mean he was a pushover for either of them. But Jefferson (and others) did come to believe that Washington was unduly under Hamilton's influence. Toward the end of the president's first term, Jefferson told him Hamilton was a dangerous man whose policies were corrupting the government.

Washington responded, according to Jefferson's notes, by saying that critics of his administration implicitly and unfairly "condemned him." If they thought there were "measures pursued contrary to his sentiment," Washington said, "they must conceive him too careless to attend to them or too stupid to understand them." Washington thus forcefully rejected insinuations that he was a mere figurehead or Hamilton's puppet.



The rivalry between Hamilton and Jefferson, as well as the rise of political parties, looms large in "Washington's Circle." Avoiding stilted language and dubious abstractions, the authors, husband-and-wife historians, keep the focus on the individuals involved with the first president. They provide not only a lively history but a group portrait of Washington and the various figures vying to influence him.

In 1790, Hamilton advised the president to appear aloof from Hamilton's own proposals before Congress, like the

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ones in 1791 calling for new taxes and a national bank. Still, the Heidlrs say, the two men "most certainly would have spoken about the subjects generally." For a time, this approach worked: The chief magistrate could seem above the fray yet have legislators assume his implicit approval of Hamilton's measures. Throughout his presidency (1789-97), Washington relied on Hamilton for advice, though Hamilton had "a peculiar sense of loyalty," as the authors note. Washington never discovered that, starting in the fall of 1789, his trusted Treasury secretary, believing it in America's interest, "was disclosing to [British agent] George Beckwith the administration's private deliberations."

By 1792, Jefferson, James Madison and their followers—initially called "republicans"—saw Hamilton and others around the president as monarchists and worried that the president "uncritically trusted" them, as the Heidlrs write. Meanwhile, Hamilton and his supporters—Federalists, who feared mob rule and favored a strong federal government—believed that Jefferson and Madison, afraid of executive power, "intended to undo the good that had been done at the Constitutional Convention," and, out of sentimental attachment to France, "were disloyal to the government." Still, until Jefferson left office at the end of 1793, Washington could keep the two factions in balance; thereafter he became increasingly surrounded by strong Federalists.

In 1795, controversy over a treaty that John Jay had negotiated with Britain began to erode Washington's hitherto impregnable popularity. In February 1796, a House resolution to extend best wishes to the president on his 64th birthday was shockingly defeated by a huge margin, 52 to 38.

Jay's Treaty averted war and facilitated trade but seemed heavily slanted toward Britain. It had been ratified by the Senate, but when Washington sought funding for the treaty from the House—where Republicans (now uppercase, ancestors of today's Democrats), led by Madison, had a large majority—the president met the kind of trouble we may recognize from today's newspapers. Republicans complained about an executive power grab; a firebrand congressman demanded documents and talked impeachment; the moderate Republican leader appeared to tag along after radicals in his party lest he be marginalized.

In the end, with the help of "ten of Madison's most reliable men," who voted with the Federalists, the House funded the treaty. Washington, who had invoked executive privilege to justify his refusal to turn over documents, felt vindicated. In less than a year, he would leave office, his presidency having been "a great success." As divided as Washington's circle often had been, he had made it serve him well. "It mattered not at all," the Heidlrs wisely write, "that he was not brilliant."

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