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George Washington Man of Faith, Christian Gentleman

Radical leftists, in their quest to demean American culture to pave the way to redesign our government, have been disparaging our Founders, including George Washington.



None of the Founding Fathers stands taller in importance than George Washington. At his funeral, Washington's good friend Henry Lee eulogized him as "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." Washington's contributions to the founding of the United States were so great that he is justly called "the Father of our Country," a recognition that without Washington, there would not be a United States of America.

This is why the radical Left, in its efforts to undermine the foundations of the country, are so persistent in besmirching the memory of Washington, whose 288th birthday we celebrate this month, on February 22.

Some of the attacks are subtle, such as referring to the federal holiday set aside to honor his memory as "Presidents Day." At one time, Washington's was the lone birthday of any American recognized both by Congress and by all 50 states. Now, his birthday is submerged in a generic day to honor all 45 presidents, whether it be Millard Fillmore or Washington. Of course, Washington's contributions to the creation of the United States go far beyond his eight years as president, and include his tenure as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and his service as president of the Constitutional Convention.

Perhaps his greatest contribution was his rejection of the opportunity to become either a king or a military dictator, when offered that chance in 1782 by many of his high-ranking Continental Army officers.

Despite all of this, a group of law students at Washington and Lee University in Virginia recently asked the college to allow future graduates the option of receiving their diploma sans the portrait of George Washington, found on the diplomas of all students. These students argue that Washington was a slave owner (perhaps ignorant that he freed his slaves), and that Washington does not properly reflect the university's "values" today.

Among the modern attacks upon Washington is the unfounded assertion that George Washington was a deist, not a Christian. A deist is a person who believes in the existence of a Supreme Being who created the world, but rejects the idea that such a deity intervenes in human affairs — which obviously would rule out a person being a Christian, as Jesus' incarnation, life, death, burial, and resurrection are the very embodiment of God's intervention into human life.

This allegation, that the "indispensable man" of American history was not a believer in Jesus Christ, has



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the benefit (from the mind-set of those who despise America's founding) of besmirching both Washington and his Christian faith, which provided the cultural consensus necessary for the nation's founding. While it is true that whether one person, even one as eminent as Washington, is a Christian has no bearing on validity of the Christian faith, these detractors desire that we should simply concede that Washington was a non-believer.

But the evidence is strong that Washington was a model Christian gentleman.

Jonathan Mitchell Sewall, a devout New Englander who had closely followed and frequently wrote on the life of Washington, told an audience in New Hampshire less than a month after Washington's death on December 14, 1799, "Let the deist reflect on this, and remember that Washington, the savior of his country, did not disdain to acknowledge and adore a great Savior, whom deists and infidels affect to slight and despise."

John Marshall, who served as the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court for more than 30 years, was a close friend of Washington, his fellow Virginian. In his biography of Washington, Marshall said that he was a "sincere believer in the Christian faith, and a truly devout man."

Admittedly, only God can know the heart of a human being, and such testimony cannot be conclusive by itself. What we can do, however, is examine not only testimony of those who knew him the best, but also read Washington's own words, which provide ample evidence that he was a sincere believer in Jesus Christ, placing his faith in Him for his own eternal destiny.

The first corroboration that Washington was a Christian lies in the lack of the evidence to the contrary: There is no evidence that Washington ever claimed to be a deist. Conversely, much evidence exists in the historical record that Washington often made remarks that indicated he was a Christian.

Washington's Christian Beliefs in His Own Words

According to William Johnson, in his book *George Washington, the Christian*, a book containing Washington's prayers in Washington's own handwriting, the prayers found in the book include Washington's plea that God pardon him for his sins and "remove them from thy presence, as far as the east is from the west, and accept me for the merits of thy son Jesus Christ, that when I come into the temple and compass thine altar, my prayers may come before thee as incense." Washington also expressed concern about the behavior of his soldiers when he served his country as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. He expressed the wish that every officer and man in that army would act as "becomes a Christian soldier." He also hoped they would refrain from the "wicked practice of profane cursing."

He spoke of Jesus as the one "who lay down in the Grave and arose again for us, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen."

We also find in the prayer book that Washington repeatedly asks for "forgiveness of sins," acknowledging the "sacrifice of Jesus Christ offered upon the cross for me." That would seem to be a very direct piece of evidence that Washington believed God intervenes in human affairs.

Washington offered to become more like Jesus, thanking God for giving him "assurance of salvation." Finally, his prayers looked forward to the day "when the trumpet shall sound, and dead shall arise and stand before the judgment seat, and give an account of whatever they have done in the body."



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Not only did Washington write down prayers in a book, he regularly offered prayers before meals in his own home. And before his step-daughter, Patsy, died in 1773 of an epileptic seizure, Washington beseeched the Lord to heal her, with tears in his eyes, according to Johnson.

He was also concerned about the welfare of others, praying for the salvation of “the whole race of mankind,” acknowledging the sufficiency of the blood of Christ to “wash” away his own sins. Washington’s faith also affected how he treated others. Before he was even 16 years of age, he copied the “Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior IN COMPANY AND CONVERSATION” into a book of personal notes. “The Rules” are thought to have been compiled by French Jesuits. Mount Vernon.org states, “*The Rules* guided Washington’s intentional actions, pronounced speech, civility to those of lower ranks, and respect for his superiors.”

One rule advised to “READ no Letters, Books, or Papers in Company but when there is Necessity for you doing of it you must ask leave.” (Today, it is quite common to see a people lost in their smartphones, rather than paying attention to people right in front of them.)

The American Revolution and Providence

Washington never neglected his reverence for God. He regarded the victory of the United States over the British Empire as a “miracle.” While Americans then, and throughout the course of American history, gave Washington all due credit for his role in securing America’s independence, he often said he was only “an instrument in the hands of Providence.”

Rod Gragg, in his book *By the Hand of Providence*, notes that Washington’s belief that God’s hand was upon the country continued after the Revolution. During his first term as president, Washington said, “I am sure there never was a people who had more reason to acknowledge a divine interposition in their affairs, than those in the United States, and I should be pained to believe that they have forgotten that agency, which was so often manifested during our Revolution, or that they failed to consider the omnipotence of that God who is alone able to protect them.”

During his last year in office, Washington wrote a Farewell Address, published in nearly every newspaper across the land, in which he offered much wisdom to the nation. (Unfortunately, far too few Americans today know what he said in the Farewell Address, and fewer follow it.) “Of all the disposition and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.” He argued that it would be “vain” to claim patriotism without “these great pillars of human happiness.” Furthermore, he wrote, “Morality is a necessary spring of popular government.”

It is simply inconceivable that the “religion” that Washington contended would prop up popular government was some dry deism, devoid of the God who intervenes in human history.

Historian Jared Sparks published *The Writings of George Washington* in the 1830s. As part of his research, he wrote to Nelly Custis-Lewis, the granddaughter of George and Martha Washington, inquiring as to the matter of Washington’s religious beliefs. Nelly was the daughter of Washington’s step-son, John Custis, and she was adopted by George and Martha after John’s untimely death. She lived with the Washingtons for the first 20 years of her life, until her marriage in 1799.

In an 1833 letter back to Sparks, she told him that her grandfather had a pew in Pohick Church, where he served for many years as a vestryman, was “instrumental” in its founding, and contributed financially to its success. “He attended the church at Alexandria when the weather and roads permitted



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a ride of ten miles. In New York and Philadelphia, he never omitted attendance at church in the morning unless detained by indisposition.”

She added that Martha, also a devout Christian, felt assured at George’s death that he was now experiencing “happiness in Heaven.”

Nelly concluded that those who question Washington’s sincere Christian faith “as well may question his patriotism, his heroic, disinterested devotion to his country.”

Skeptical Arguments Against Washington’s Faith

In the face of such powerful evidence, there remain skeptics. Some argue that Washington often left church before the communion service. But many other times, he *did* take communion. One can only speculate as to why Washington did not always participate in communion. It is known that it was a popular view of the day that one should not participate in communion if one considered himself “unworthy.”

Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton, the wife of Washington’s close confidant Alexander Hamilton, told her great-grandson in 1854, “If anyone ever tells you that George Washington was not a communicant in the Church, you say that your great-grandmother told you to say that she had knelt at this chancel rail at his side and received with him the Holy Communion.”

Others are quick to cite Washington’s frequent public reference to God as the “Author of Life,” or as “Divine Providence,” and similar expressions, arguing that such language is more like one would hear from a deist than a Christian. In his first inaugural address, Washington argued that America “was under the special agency of Providence.”

To the modern Christian, such words sound impersonal. But in the culture of the day, such references to God were common, much like today someone might refer to God as “The Almighty.”

Perhaps “The Rules” gives us a clue into Washington’s thinking. Rule 108 states, “WHEN you Speak of God or his Attributes, let it be Seriously & with Reverence.” One cannot imagine Washington ever referring to God “as the Man Upstairs,” or taking his name in vain, as is done regularly today in the popular culture.

Ron Chernow, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Washington: A Life*, was blunt: “He was clearly a Christian.” He added, “He was quite intensely religious, because even though he uses the word Providence, he constantly sees Providence as an active force in life, particularly in American life. I mean, every single victory in war he credits to Providence. The miracle of the Constitutional Convention he credits to Providence. The creation of the federal government and the prosperity of the early republic, he credits to Providence.... I was struck at how frequently in his letters he’s referring to Providence, and it’s Providence where there’s a sense of design and purpose.”

As Nelly Custis-Lewis wrote to Sparks, “I should have thought it the greatest heresy to doubt his firm belief in Christianity. His life, his writings, prove that he was a Christian. He was not one of those who ... pray that they may be seen of men.”

He prayed to God, not to man. During the War for Independence, General Robert Porterfield said that Washington would kneel in prayers for morning devotions, and Alexander Hamilton noted the same activity as Washington’s “constant habit.” According to Sparks, Washington’s nephew George Lewis



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“accidentally witnessed [Washington’s] private devotions in his library both morning and evening; that on those occasions he had seen him in a kneeling position with a Bible open before him and that he believed such to have been his daily practice.”

To continue to insist that Washington was a deist, not a Christian, despite such overwhelming evidence, seems ludicrous.

The Importance of Christianity and Civil Government

So why is it such a common assertion today? Many simply repeat what they have heard in ignorance. Others, however, know that the statement that Washington was a deist is a falsehood, but they repeat the accusation because they wish to tear down the “great man” of American history, and thus bring him down to their own level. After all, if George Washington rejected biblical Christianity, it justifies their own rejection of the God of the Bible, and the rejection of the foundations of the country they wish to destroy and “fundamentally transform.”

Certainly we should not make a god out of George Washington, or any other man. The Founding Fathers were all human beings, complete with all of the failings found in all human beings, and Washington had his faults. But that is the essence of the Christian faith — all human beings are sinners and in need of a Savior. And that is what Washington believed.

Distortions of history, such as ones disparaging Washington’s faith, should be corrected, especially falsehoods intended to advance some secular agenda. As Paul Gottfried wrote in *The American Conservative*, “The fact that he [Washington] and other founders include in their addresses stern affirmations on the link between religious faith and social virtue indicate that they were not smirking at Christian theology.” He added that Washington issued a Thanksgiving proclamation, extolling “our blessed religion.”

A few years ago, my family and I took a vacation trip to the Washington, D.C., area, and we went out to Mount Vernon. While there, I was struck by the Bible verse on the wall of Washington’s tomb. Taken from the Gospel of John, it is a quotation from Jesus, to reassure Martha, the sister of Jesus’ dead friend, Lazarus: “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.”

It would indeed be strange for a deist — a person who believes God is some impersonal deity who takes no interest in human affairs — to include such a statement of belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ at his burial plot. Since deists believe in a Creator of the universe who otherwise does not intervene in human affairs, belief in just about *any* Christian doctrine, much less the belief in the literal physical resurrection of its Founder, would be a flat contradiction.

Of course, one could argue that Washington did not believe in the bodily resurrection of the saints, and members of his family included the saying at his tomb anyway. But one has to wonder why the family of George and Martha Washington would erect a placard with such an explicitly Christian statement supporting the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of Christians, if he was actually a deist.

So why do some insist that Washington was a deist, and not what he clearly was, a Christian gentleman? The de-Christianization of the Founders is mostly the result of a political agenda. While a recent president neglected to include the words “by their Creator” when citing the passage in the Declaration of Independence which declares “all men are endowed by their Creator with certain



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unalienable rights," it is unthinkable that Washington or any of the Founding Fathers would have done so.

When Thomas Jefferson penned those words, he was drawing heavily from the writings of English political theorist John Locke. Locke argued in his famous book *Treatise on Civil Government* that the rights of human beings come from God, not from government. Locke also argued for the intervention of God into human affairs via miracles, that the Bible that recorded them was "truth, without any mixture of error."

The very foundation of the American Revolution — the revolution in which George Washington served as the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army that won our national independence — was that God intervenes in human affairs. In his Farewell Address, Washington also saw the importance of Christianity to the success of civil government. "Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice?"

Even Benjamin Franklin, perhaps the most worldly of the Founding Fathers, remarked at the Constitutional Convention, "I've lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing Proofs I see of this Truth — That God governs in the Affairs of Men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his Notice, is it probable that an Empire can rise without his Aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings, that except the Lord build the House they labor in vain who build it."

If Franklin, who was a member of the committee assigned to write the Declaration of Independence along with John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, could make such a statement, which essentially rejected deism, it is ludicrous to believe that Washington, who often expressed orthodox Christian beliefs both in writing and in public statements, was a deist.

Washington Did Not Lie About His Christian Faith

After reading the numerous letters that Washington wrote to various people over the course of his life, the historian Jared Sparks concluded, "To say that he [Washington] was not a Christian would be to impeach his sincerity and honesty. Of all men in the world, Washington was certainly the last whom any one would charge with dissimulation or indirectness; and if he was so scrupulous in avoiding even a shadow of these faults in every known act of his life, however unimportant, is it likely, is it credible, that in a matter of the highest and most serious importance he should practice through a long series of years a deliberate deception upon his friends and the public? It is neither credible nor possible."

It is not credible. In 1778, during the War for Independence, in which Washington had witnessed many times what he considered divine intervention in the survival of his rag-tag Continental Army, he wrote, "The Hand of Providence has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith ... that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations." Anyone who could write that was no deist, at least not an honest one. Perhaps that is why it is very appropriate that the bodily resurrection so central to the Christian faith is affirmed at Washington's grave.

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