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George Washington's Rules for the Radically Right

If George Washington gives up power in the wake of American independence, “he will be the greatest man in the world.” Thus remarked our first president’s adversary, King George III, after being told that Washington would likely follow his victory by retiring to his Mount Vernon home. Yet the king’s incredulity would be met with a striking reality: Washington would relinquish power *twice*. Once “at the end of the revolutionary war, when he resigned his military commission and returned to Mount Vernon,” wrote the Cato Institute in its 2006 piece “The Man Who Would Not Be King,” “and again at the end of his second term as president, when he refused entreaties to seek a third term. In doing so, he set a standard for American presidents that lasted until the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose taste for power was stronger than the 150 years of precedent set by Washington.”



The reason my essay on “killing our heroes” was entitled “Where Have You Gone, George Washington?” (The New American, April 4, 2016) is that our first president is the closest thing to a real-life storybook hero we may find in American history. Though the Cherry Tree tale concerning a six-year-old Washington telling his angry father “I can not tell a lie: I cut the tree” is itself a fib, conjured up by Washington biographer Mason Locke Weems, there is a reason a woman, quoted by historian Karal Ann Marling, stated, “If the tale isn’t true, it should be.” For the myth perfectly encapsulates the man. As the University of Virginia American Studies website puts it,

The American public may have known that Parson Weems’ story of young Washington and his cherry tree rang false, but for the citizenry of the early United States of America, the idea behind the fable declared what they believed was true: Washington equaled honesty. I have no desire to hold onto my power, Washington told the people, and then he kept his word, proving no intention to deceive.

If only the typical politician were so truthful.

But Washington wasn’t a typical anything. Grove City College’s Center for Vision & Values explained why, writing in 2010:

What made George Washington the most remarkable man of an extraordinary generation? He was not an intellectual giant like Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, or James Madison. Compared with most other founders, he was not well educated (he attended school for only about five years), and, unlike many of them, he disliked abstract philosophical discussions. Washington was



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intelligent, well informed, and astute, but he was neither a polished writer nor a spellbinding speaker. Moreover, he was not particularly affectionate, said little in public meetings, and lacked the charisma of many of his successors. Defeating the British with his ragtag army was an impressive feat, but he was not a traditional military hero. He won no spectacular victories during the Revolutionary War. Although he is widely admired as an outstanding president, few of his policies were stupendous successes.

While praising his military and political record, many scholars contend that Washington's genius lies principally in his character. The only other American president who has been so highly extolled for his character is Abraham Lincoln.... His character helped sustain his troops throughout the travails of the Revolutionary War, convince delegates to the Constitutional Convention to assign significant powers to the presidency, secure the ratification of the Constitution, and enable the new republic to survive in a hostile world.

As with ability in music, sports, or anything else, this moral character didn't develop by happenstance; Washington worked at it. And this endeavor was best illustrated by a set of 110 rules — the "Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour IN COMPANY AND CONVERSATION" — that he copied into the last 10 pages of a book of his personal notes before he was 16 years old. Yet while consensus holds that Washington embodied the rules, they were not of his design. As MountVernon.org informs, "The rules were derived from an original list of maxims originally compiled by French Jesuits in the 1590s that was eventually translated into English by Francis Hawkins in London around 1640. In subsequent editions of Hawkins' book other writers added to the maxims." And Washington used them to add to his character. As MountVernon.org also tells us, "Washington grew up lacking the gentlemen's education typically accustomed for the children of wealthy landowners. With few people to model his behavior on and an acute awareness of his lack of formal education, *The Rules* guided Washington's intentional actions, pronounced speech, civility to those of lower ranks, and respect for his superiors."

So what were *The Rules* and what can we learn from them today? Many involve treatment of "betters" or those of higher "quality" and would no doubt now be seen as strikingly class-oriented (having said this, man is hierarchical by nature and we have descended into the other extreme: radical egalitarianism). Yet they also contain restrictions for the mighty, with the 36th rule stating that those of "high Degree" should treat those of lower status "with affability & Courtesie, without Arrogancy." Other rules prescribe basic common sense: Respect others in company, don't embarrass people, and don't indulge annoying habits around others (Specificity is provided — keep your nails clean, don't chew with your mouth open, etc.). Then there are rules that may be considered excessively punctilious, such as the 10th, which states, "When you Sit down, Keep your Feet firm and Even, without putting one on the other or Crossing them." Of course, one may quibble with some of the rules — and for all we know, Washington might have himself — yet there nonetheless is a lesson here, one especially important in our time of moral laxity.

That many today would scoff at the high "church lady" standards the rules prescribed says more about us than it does about them. Oh, it's not that we're any less "anal retentive," to use a popular modern pejorative — we're just so about the wrong things. Consider the Cult of Recreation. We not only may spend thousands of dollars on sports training and display jihadist-like passion over athletic contests, but our attention to detail can be hyperscrupulous. For example, a serious competitive golfer will hit balls in front of a computerized "launch monitor" that tells him his club-head speed, ball speed, spin rate, launch angle, and carry distance, just so he can order a custom-made driver that maximizes his



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distance. His clubs will be made certain lengths and lofts, with a certain kick point and lie angle, and they will have certain types of shafts, and his wedges may have specific degrees of “bounce” and certain types of soles, just to name a handful of considered factors. Can you imagine how people of Washington’s time would laugh and shake their heads incredulously if they could witness such “religious” recreation; that is assuming they wouldn’t have been impeded by the 65th rule, “Scoff at none although they give Occasion”? And can you imagine the improved state of affairs if we placed as much emphasis on goodness as we do on excellence? In truth, the difference today is that the meticulousness is misdirected: We’re frivolous about morality and maniacal about frivolity.

Of course, and as I often point out, our preference for matters of taste over those of Truth stems from our godlessness and its related moral relativism, which essentially states that Truth doesn’t exist. To understand how this skews priorities, imagine our moral/social world as a series of concentric circles. The nucleus, the center, should be occupied by God and His Truth; the next layer would include family, and beyond that country, then maybe career, so on and so forth, and recreation would be on the periphery. Yet what happens when God is evicted from the nucleus? The circle implodes, and the more peripheral can become central. And without Truth to order thinking and priorities, that outermost layer can become the very kernel of our existence (e.g., the man who neglects his family in favor of playing cards with the “boys”).

Yet the average person is not a philosopher, and no young child is; thus, philosophical explanations, necessary though they are, don’t serve to directly inculcate a people with virtue. And herein lies the value of heroes such as Washington who espouse and uphold virtue-based rules. As Boston College Professor Emeritus William K. Kilpatrick wrote in his book *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right From Wrong*, “Children ought to be brought up in an atmosphere that provides them examples of nobility and grace. This imaginative education is not a substitute for a reasoned morality, but it paves the way for it, making it more likely that the grown child will happily accept the dictates of reason.” In this way, Kilpatrick explains, echoing Greek philosopher Plato, the person can develop an emotional attachment to virtue; he elaborates, “Just as the senses can be enlisted on the side of vice, so (with a little more difficulty) can they be enlisted on the side of virtue.”

In other words, this means using for good a technique that in recent times has been used, to spectacular effect, for evil. For example, activists long ago grasped the phenomenon of “absolution from guilt” by association: Get people to develop a strong affinity for a television character — to laugh and cry and identify with him — and they’ll begin to accept that with which he’s strongly associated (such as homosexuality). Likewise, develop in children a strong attachment to a hero (such as Washington), where they admire his strength, bravery, and derring-do, and they’ll begin to accept that with which he’s strongly associated: virtue. This, mind you, is one reason heroes are idealized (e.g., the Cherry Tree tale): They become ideal role models. As Washington’s 48th rule states, in part, “Example is more prevalent than Precepts,” or actions speak louder than words.

And one action speaking loudly is to be resolute with the right words. What is assumed is learned best, and herein lies the value of a firm set of rules lived uncompromisingly: The more we act as if Truth exists, the more our actions will influence people to believe in Truth. Behave as if rules are nebulous, negotiable, and meant to be broken, and they will be.

As for our morally broken time, *The Rules* presents much that would correct its characteristic flaws. Here are a handful of examples (some are presented only in part):



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Seventh: “PUT not off your Cloths in the presence of Others, nor go out your Chamber half Drest.” Is this not needed in a time of scantily clad newswomen, teens wearing pajama pants to school, and increasing tolerance for public nudity?

18th: “READ no Letters, Books, or Papers in Company but when there is a Necessity for the doing of it you must ask leave.” Good advice for the “screen junkies” who continually get intimate with their iPhones at gatherings, sending the message to others, “Sorry, but this is more interesting than you are.”

46th: “Take all Admonitions thankfully in what Time or Place Soever given but afterwards not being culpable take a Time or Place Convenient to let him know it that gave them” (meaning, accept criticism gracefully; if it’s unwarranted, tell the person discreetly afterwards). Social-justice-warrior college students demanding “safe spaces” absent of criticism should take note.

54th: “PLAY not the Peacock, looking everywhere about you, to See if you be well Deck’t, if your Shoes fit well if your Stockings Sit neatly, and Cloths handsomely.” Calling all “metrosexuals”: Don’t be a dandy! Vanity is a sin.

58th: “In all Causes of Passion admit Reason to Govern.” In an emotion-driven time epitomized by the credo “If it feels good, do it” and the dismissive pejorative “white male linear logic,” reason needs some good press.

79th: “BE not apt to relate News if you know not the truth thereof.” There goes the whole mainstream-media business model.

108th: “WHEN you Speak of God or his Attributes, let it be Seriously & with Reverence.” With irreligiosity masquerading as sophistication today — and with Hollywood purposely and frequently taking the Lord’s name in vain in movies — this rule can’t be stressed enough.

109th: “LET your Recreations be Manfull not Sinfull.” What would Washington have thought of the notion that porn enjoys First Amendment protection? Of course, living this rule would mean that all our popular culture would become very unpopular.

110th: “LABOUR to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire called Conscience.” With the relativistic majority claiming there is no Truth, which would mean there is nothing to be conscientious about — and with some psychologists claiming even free will doesn’t exist — this is sorely needed advice.

Bearing special attention in our time is the 49th: “USE no Reproachfull Language against anyone neither Curse nor Revile.” Unlike the Nixon tapes, if recordings of Washington existed, they wouldn’t be peppered with the edit “expletive deleted.” Our first president was famous for guarding his tongue, reflecting a priority that became a general order on August 3, 1776 when he wrote, “The General is sorry to be informed that the foolish, and wicked practice, of profane cursing and swearing (a Vice heretofore little known in an American Army) is growing into fashion; he hopes the officers will, by example, as well as influence, endeavour to check it, and that both they, and the men will reflect, that we can have little hopes of the blessing of Heaven on our Arms, if we insult it by our impiety, and folly; added to this, it is a vice so mean and low, without any temptation, that every man of sense, and character, detests and despises it.”

Today, sadly, profane cursing and swearing “without any temptation” — meaning, as a matter of course



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— has become status quo. It has even seeped into conservative commentary, the last few years in particular, with words such as c***, a**, dumb***, and s**t appearing at high-profile conservative sites *without the asterisks*. It eludes these conservatives that they're merely conserving another leftist con, proving G.K. Chesterton's observation, "The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of Conservatives is to prevent mistakes from being corrected." Who, after all, began the mainstreaming of vulgarity (hint: it wasn't the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary)? Do we really want to follow the lead of Hollywood? Must we ever conserve yesterday's liberals' victories in social degradation?

The cutting-edge Left will say, "They're just words," ironic coming from the authors and preservers of political correctness, which is all about censoring words. But words influence thoughts and can thus coarsen or refine thinking, which then itself influences words, creating a loop of either increasing sophistication or increasing savagery. Nonetheless, many now find cursing "manful"; when I wrote on this topic years ago, a conservative respondent implied that I sounded like Little Lord Fauntleroy (another good role model, mind you). Yet this is an additional reason Washington makes for an excellent hero: He was indisputably a man's man, brave as they came — and illustrated that a true man is marked by virtue.

Of course, it's now fashionable to dismiss the virtuous as squares if not phonies (how better to justify vice?). Comedian-cum-commentator Bill Maher once sarcastically defended the Boy Scouts of America and their traditional standards by quipping, "The squares need some place to go," which is precisely why philosopher C.S. Lewis had lamented that we "laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst." A (slightly) more intellectual sneer at virtue was delivered by *Talking Points Memo* founder Joshua Micah Marshall in a 2005 *New Yorker* book review. Speaking of our first president, he opined, "Character, for the man as for the nation, turns out to be something that you make, not something that you discover; Washington, as we learn, was never more completely himself than when he was acting." He echoed this some paragraphs later, writing, "Again and again, Washington struck men of his day as an exemplar of ancient republican ideals, almost as though he had stepped from the pedestal of the ages.... [But] it was all a put-on, an act. For us today, character is bound up with authenticity; someone with 'character' doesn't put on airs, doesn't tailor his actions to impress others. Those weren't the standards of Washington's era."

So nothing of substance to see here, kids, move along. Who needs Washington when you've got Che? Marshall may not be inclined to read *The Rules*, yet if he does, he may cite to support his position the 23rd, which advises, "When you see a Crime punished, you may be inwardly Pleased; but always shew Pity to the Suffering Offender." Yet as the earlier-referenced Cato Institute piece states:

Marshall missed the point. Washington understood that character is something you develop. He learned from Aristotle that good conduct arises from habits that in turn can only be acquired by repeated action and correction — "We are what we repeatedly do." Indeed, the word "ethics" comes from the Greek word for "habit." We say something is "second nature" because it's not actually natural; it's a habit we've developed.

Do we not understand this, instinctively, in lesser matters? An aspiring golfer does not, in the name of "authenticity," refuse to change bad technique, even though such changes often initially feel very unnatural, almost an athletic version of putting on airs; rather, he trains long hours honing his skills until proper action is habitual and his "golf character" enhanced. Likewise, "virtue" refers to the set of



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moral habits; and as with golf skill (which, unlike talent, is not developed but innate), “virtue is not hereditary,” as Thomas Paine reminded us.

When Marshall speaks of “discovering” vs. “making” character, he confuses discovering what your character is with discovering what it *should* be. Anyone engaging in honest self-discovery discovers simply this: He is a fallen creature, as far from Heaven as a duffer is from the PGA Tour. Marshall appears to espouse the modernist notion that a person should just “be himself,” which has become an excuse for indulging license. But Hitler was himself. Stalin was himself. Mao was himself. Washington likely understood that an animal is “himself”; our divine mandate is to become what God wants us to be — like Himself.

Therein lies the value of grace — and of rules. Were our “heart” perfectly formed, we wouldn’t need rules at all. Yet the Bible itself tells us, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” All but sociopaths have a conscience, yet it’s rare for it to be perfectly formed; we may feel some truths on an emotional level while being numb to others. For example, a man may recoil at theft but barely blink at fornication. This is where proper rules can fill in the blanks, giving our head at least a fighting chance to overrule the heart where the latter is wanting (difficult though resisting its charms is). Sure, it goes without saying that, initially at least, a person won’t have his heart in the head-led actions, but this doesn’t make it a head-fake. It is actually a type of nobility: Like that golfer laboring to effect a seemingly “unnatural” technique change, the person is bucking his instincts, acting rightly when doing wrong could feel so, so satisfying.

And, anyway, isn’t the “authenticity” argument hypocritical? What person, when he faces a job interviewer or aims to win a lady’s affections, will express every thought and feeling? Everyone has filters. And what person, instead of being met with somewhat forced civility, would prefer being cursed out by some authentic individual having an authentically bad day? Being oneself can be overrated.

George Washington understood that there is, as he put it, “an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness.” He also recognized that adherence to rules of civility serves to develop virtue, which is also necessary for freedom. This is why “the most important of all revolutions,” noted British philosopher Edmund Burke, is “a revolution in sentiments, manners and moral opinions.” We have experienced that revolution — or perhaps we should say devolution — and today America seems more epitomized by socialist Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals* than by any rules for rightness. And to really make America great again, we’ll need a counter-revolution that rebuilds national character, the Washington way.

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