Published in *The Baltimore Sun*
and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

Monday, February 16, 1998 : The Sun

OPINION ■ COMMENTARY

Reflections on a man of undeniable character

By PETER GIBBON

IN 1800, the Rev. Mason Locke Weems wrote "The Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington." Determined to write a biography to inspire people and a young country, Weems made up stories, deleted unpleasant facts and freely drew moral lessons.

His goal, he said, was "to exalt human nature." It was Weems who had young Washington try his new hatchet on a cherry tree, and Weems who invented the father's reply to George's honesty: "Such an act of heroism is worth more than a thousand trees." Abraham Lincoln was inspired by one of the 70 editions of Weems' book; so probably were thousands of other young Americans.

I travel around the country talking to students about the importance of heroes. George Washington is not an easy sell in 1998, even on his birthday. He was a soldier and an aristocrat. He owned slaves. Students today want to know about his fierce temper and wooden teeth and whether he grew marijuana at Mount Vernon. They ask about his relationship with Sally Fairfax and why he and Martha had no children.

It helps to remind my audience that Washington was human. His father died when he was 11, his mother was dour and offered little guidance. He did not attend college or travel to Europe. He couldn't marry the woman he loved, nor get from Britain the military position he believed he deserved. In an age when disease killed capriciously, he watched his half-brother, Lawrence, die from tuberculosis and his stepdaughter, Patsy, succumb to epilepsy. His own face was scarred by smallpox, his body weakened by malaria and dysentery.

Washington liked to play cards, drink wine, dance and watch cockfights. He was happiest on horseback, chasing foxes, hacking trails and improving his estate. Until 1774, he seemed one of us.

Then the war came. He never wanted to be commander. He should have lost. Britain was confident and formidable — the 18th-century superpower. Washington had few soldiers, and they were untrained. Short of boots and bullets, they became bitter. Many Americans bet on Britain.

At first, Washington failed at Brooklyn Heights and Brandywine. And he suffered as his men went without pay, Congress squabbled, his army melted away and defeat seemed certain. He wrote in a letter: "I never was in such an unhappy divided state." In 1776, he told his brother he would gladly quit.

But he didn't. He dodged and retreated and somehow kept an army in the field. He took risks. He attacked at Trenton and Princeton. He forced himself to appear confident and indomitable, despite fatigue and frustration. And he grew as a general and politician and human being.

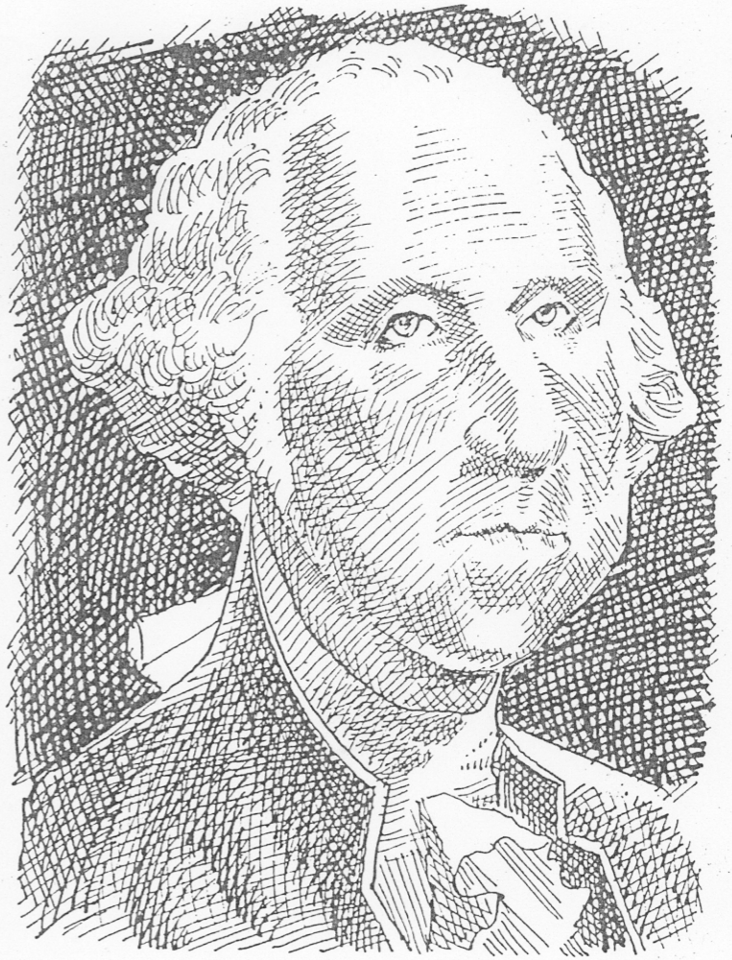
He learned to use the wilderness and to exploit Britain's arrogance. Patiently, he extracted authority and supplies from a divided Congress. Stoically, he shook off critics. Above all, he endured until the French sent money and Britain grew weary.

I tell my audiences that Washington is great because he showed extraordinary courage, not just the courage to face bullets, but the courage to stick to a cause no matter how great the odds, the courage to shake off failure and transcend pain, the courage to take risks, to change, to grow.

When the war was over, Washington gave up his sword and returned to Mount Vernon to tend his garden. His magnanimity astonished the world. He was happy at Mount Vernon and would have preferred to stay there. But the Confederation was weak. The same sense of duty that made him give up his sword forced him to return to Philadelphia, and then to serve eight years as president. I tell students that a hero puts his country's welfare before his personal happiness.

It is not hard to understand why 200 years ago, Americans revered Washington. He was a soldier and a superb horseman. He was tall, imposing, mysterious. Tested by crisis and war, he endured and prevailed.

Washington also inspired respect from those who knew him best. He was not brilliant like Hamilton nor eloquent like Jefferson. He lacked Franklin's originality and Madison's insight. But our first president had character.



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Like the Stoics whose works he read, Washington exercised self-control. Imitating the famous Roman general Cato, he valued honor and reputation more than wealth and power. Attending church, he believed in a God that watched. He believed in conscience and in kindness. He had a few simple but powerful influences, a few key, enduring convictions. He was a man who eschewed extremes. A man with a center who could not be budged by catastrophe or success.

In skeptical times, more interested in reality than in mythology, it is important to recognize George Washington's humanity. In a crowd, he seemed shy. On the podium, he was inarticulate. Contemporaries found him courteous but cold.

Recognizing Washington's humanity, however, should not blind us to his heroism. In crisis he stood firm. Through willpower, he turned himself into an able general, a masterful administrator and a prudent statesman. He learned from his mistakes, coped with his despair, demanded no reward.

Always he placed the country's welfare above his personal happiness. He assumed the president should be an example to the nation. In 1789, before his inauguration, he wrote: "Integrity and firmness are all I can promise." Thomas Jefferson thought him great and good. So should we.

Peter Gibbon is a research associate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.