

George Washington and the founding of  
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## **George Washington and the Founding of Democracy**

Seymour Martin Lipset

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **George Washington and the Founding of Democracy**

*Seymour Martin Lipset\* (bio)*

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George Washington is an underestimated figure. Abraham Lincoln,

Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin are seen as real people with lives and emotions; Washington is a painting on the wall. Yet I believe that he is the most important single figure in American history. Without him, the Revolution might have failed. This is not because of his military ability; he lost many of the battles he fought, and only French intervention brought victory. His first enormous achievement was to build and maintain the morale of the Continental Army's troops and the loyalty of its officers under depressing conditions. Later, during the Newburgh crisis of 1783, he secured their obedience to civilian authority at a time when they were sorely tempted to do otherwise. He exemplified the ultimate in self-sacrificing heroism.

Another George, King George III of England, who was Washington's enemy, acknowledged his significance. The king asked the painter Jonathan Trumbull, freshly arrived from America, what he thought Washington would do when the war ended. "Go back to his farm," Trumbull replied. "If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world," rejoined the king.<sup>1</sup> And that *is* what Washington did, twice—first when the war ended, and later after his second term as president of the United States. Following this second withdrawal, King George reiterated his opinion, saying that these actions "placed [Washington] in a light the most distinguished of any man living," and made him "the greatest character of the age."<sup>2</sup> The Duke of Wellington, Britain's **[End Page 24]** foremost soldier and the victor at Waterloo, described Washington as "perhaps the purest and noblest character of modern times."<sup>3</sup>

Like almost all successful people, Washington was very ambitious. But his ambition was not for power and money—both of which he had—but for his repute, for what people thought of him. To be seen as a man of integrity and virtue was the reward he sought. Both as commander-in-chief and as president, he refused to accept any salary, and he eagerly looked forward to giving up military and political power and going home to his plantation at Mount Vernon on the Virginia shore of the Potomac River. And yet, when he was selected as a member of the Continental Congress in 1775, he entered it wearing the uniform (his own design) of a

colonel in the Virginia militia. The only member of Congress to report so attired, he caused some to think, at the time and later, that he was offering to assume command of the Continental Army then forming in the siege works hemming in the British garrison of Boston. Some scholars reject this conclusion, however, noting that when his name was broached, Washington withdrew from the session after asking a friend to speak against the idea.

Little need be said here about Washington the general, or of what he did prior to the closing years of the Revolution, as important as such aspects of his career undoubtedly are.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I will discuss Washington as a founder, the man who helped the United States to formulate an identity and to institutionalize a competitive electoral democracy—or, to put it in terms that Washington himself would have found more familiar, to establish a republic.

The relevance of individual greatness to history has been much debated.<sup>5</sup> In ironic contrast to the theoretical determinism of Marxism, the history of twentieth-century communist regimes underlines the importance of the leader. It may be strongly argued that if Lenin had not been able to return to Russia in April 1917, or if he had been killed or imprisoned, the October Revolution would never have occurred. Prior to Lenin's arrival at the Finland Station (courtesy of the German General Staff) and his bold proposal that the Bolsheviks plan to seize power, no left-wing factional leader had favored such a move. Everyone adhered instead to the Marxist assumption that the next stage of Russia's development had to be a bourgeois revolution, with capitalism and industrialization preceding any move toward "workers' power." Only Trotsky thought otherwise, but he...



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