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## A Review of Henriques' Realistic Visionary

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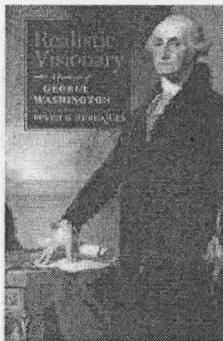
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Book Review I

**Realistic Visionary: A Portrait of George Washington**  
By Peter Henriques



Reviewed by John Prendergast '10

In *Realistic Visionary: A Portrait of George Washington*, Peter Henriques attempts to “humanize Washington without diminishing him” (Preface xii). After all, much has been written about our first President over the past two-hundred and thirty-three years. In this vein, authors have often portrayed Washington in a gloomy light, noting his dry personality and his inability to handle criticism. While these portrayals do hold some water, it is unfair to ignore the rest of the facts which shed light on Washington’s insurmountable character—as a soldier, as a president, and as a husband. Thus, Henriques offers a comprehensive examination of Washington’s private and public life to prove that our first President was truly a “realistic visionary” who was designing a nation for the “millions unborn” (xii).

At the outset, Henriques examines the young, athletic Colonel Washington during his service under General Braddock in the French and Indian War. Washington was an ambitious young man and his desire for honor and glory is a theme which stretched throughout the course of his life. In search for honor and glory, however, Washington sometimes displayed an extreme lack of judgment. In one such example, Washington ordered an assault on the French diplomatic party known as the Jumonville Affair which spurred many to call Washington a murderer; this event also led to the outbreak of the war and is best summed up by Voltaire’s famous quotation: “a shot fired in the wilderness set the world ablaze.” Washington’s lack of judgment continued when he gave Braddock bad advice at the Battle of the Wilderness by splitting the advancing British army into two divisions—this decision turned out to be “one of the great British disasters of the eighteenth century” (9). Despite these unforeseeable results, Washington went on to show tremendous leadership on the battlefield as evident when General Braddock fell prey to enemy fire. This display of character led Washington to request the King’s commission and a promotion in rank, a request which was denied countless times. Feeling extremely unappreciated, Washington chose to retire from military life at the age of twenty-six.

Washington became further angered with Great Britain a few years later when laws were passed which hindered his ability to advance his agricultural business. With a

rapidly growing discontent toward Great Britain, George Washington began to delve into the Radical Whig message of Britain's evident tyrannical plans to enslave the colonists. In light of these developments yet acting visibly reluctant, George Washington ended his retirement and accepted the nomination to be the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. However, Henriques claims Washington would not have worn his military uniform when he showed up to Congress if he really did not want the nomination. Additionally, Washington neither suggested to Congress other possible candidates for the job nor did he accept a stipend for his services. By doing this, Washington demonstrated that he could handle power and authority in a responsible manner.

Washington emerged from the Revolutionary War as the "unrivaled hero and savior of his country" (45) and in 1789 he was unanimously elected as the first President of the United States. In terms of assessing his Presidency, Henriques acknowledges that Washington had very limited resources at his disposal yet he made do and got the country headed in the right direction. With that said, Washington's Presidency contained many crises which directly impacted various people within his administration. For one, the country was suffering extensively in terms of finances as there was a mounting war debt, and thus Washington relied heavily on Alexander Hamilton, a fellow Federalist who also sought honor and glory. Washington made Hamilton his Secretary of the Treasury, a job through which Hamilton successfully assumed states' war debt and established a powerful national bank. Henriques brilliantly refers to Hamilton as "the indispensable man to the 'Indispensable Man'." Without Hamilton, Washington's Presidency very well may have ended differently. Unfortunately, Washington did not have the same outgoing relationship with his Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson. Although both men maintained a mutual respect for one another, Jefferson was furious over Washington's support of the 1795 Jay Treaty which essentially acted as an appeasement toward Great Britain—Jefferson saw the treaty as treason that shut down any attempt at a Franco-American alliance. This, along with the 1796 "Mazzei letter" where Jefferson bashed Washington's old age and even more senile advisors, led to the complete rupture in relationship between Washington and Jefferson.

Moving away from the military and political spectrum, Henriques studies Washington's triangular love relationship with Sally Fairfax and Martha Custis. Washington was engaged to Martha but, according to various letter correspondences, was deeply in love with Sally, a black-haired beauty who tended to Washington when he fell severely ill in 1757. Henriques' quotation best describes Washington's feelings about the situation: "George Washington was many things, but one thing he was not, and would not be, was a Puritan" (74). Washington was in love with someone other than his fiancée and he was not afraid to proclaim that to Sally. With that said, Martha was truly the love of Washington's life and he understood this. His marriage to Martha in 1759 not only provided Washington with financial security but also provided him with psychic security—"[Martha] gave him the type of unconditional support and love that his personality, perhaps in part because of his difficult childhood, seemed so desperately to need" (91). After all, she kept her husband company during the grueling winters at Valley Forge, tended to Mount Vernon while her husband was absent for long periods of time, and reluctantly relocated with her husband when he accepted the Presidency because she understood his duties to the country. None of this went unrecognized by Washington as

Henriques claims that “few men...are fortunate enough to have had such a loving and devoted wife” (104).

As Henriques nears the end of his biographical account, he examines Washington’s views on slavery and religion. Washington was born in Virginia, a slave society where 40% of the population were slaves for life (146). He had many slaves on his estate at Mount Vernon and he worked them hard. However, Washington referred to his slaves as his family and he recognized that they were emotional beings just as whites were. If a slave was ill, Washington would not force them to work but rather, he would supply the slave with medical attention. Over time, Washington slowly grew to see problems with slavery because the concept violated basic constitutional principles and, therefore, Washington freed his slaves in his final will. In terms of religion, many groups try to claim George Washington as their own. However, the truth is Washington was not a very religious person; granted, he believed in a higher-being which he called “Providence” and he believed in a form of afterlife. Still, Washington lacked religiousness on his deathbed. Washington was not afraid to die—it was something which he readily embraced. For Washington, it all came down to secular immortality—he wanted to be remembered for what he accomplished in life. As long as he would be remembered by the “millions unborn,” he would gracefully and willingly pass on into the afterlife.

In his work, Peter Henriques fittingly uses many themes throughout Washington’s life as a way to understand his character. A Professor of History Emeritus at George Mason University, Henriques avoids a blow by blow, chronological account of Washington’s life and, by doing so, effectively allows the reader to see and comprehend Washington’s character among varying avenues of interpretation. At the outset, Henriques states that he wants “to humanize Washington without diminishing him.” To a great extent the author accomplishes this feat—Henriques makes many concessions along the way but that is because he wants the full truth to be known; sometimes the truth can hurt, sure, but in doing so the reader is made available to the greater picture. For example, George Washington was almost certainly a racist. Henriques acknowledges that he was “an elitist by temperament and upbringing...no doubt, he had an engrained sense of racial superiority” (155). With that said, Henriques uses this foundation to establish that Washington was most impressive in how his attitudes changed over time as evident when he freed his slaves. Moreover, Henriques demonstrates that he is not afraid to use evidence from other scholars’ works, along with his own knowledge, to corroborate many of the points he makes throughout his account. His range of reference spans among great minds such as Joseph Ellis, Ron Chernow, and Paul Longmore to name a few. After all, “humanizing” Washington with evidence from only one author is an unbelievable task and, thus, Henriques successfully avoids any kind of egotistical trap by citing authors who are able to convey a certain detail more effectively or succinctly than he.

Unfortunately, there are some students of history who maintain that George Washington was solely a dry personality who could not handle criticism. Peter Henriques successfully establishes, through his work *Realistic Visionary*, that claims such as these are erroneous. Washington was a man of exponential character who resisted power’s temptation on many instances. He proved early on that he could handle responsibility and, by reluctantly accepting nominations, he implicitly asserted that he had no interest in establishing a dictatorship. He was dedicated to the experiment of republican government

and he set the precedent for term limits by engaging in the peaceful exchange from one presidential administration to the next. William Shakespeare once said “he was a man, take him for all in all...I shall not look upon his like again.” Shakespeare’s carefully chosen words emulate the sentiment created by our first President. And arguably most essential founding father. He was the “Indispensable Man” who combined reason and emotion to contribute to the fabric of what we can now call the most powerful, democratic nation in the world—the United States of America.

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## *The Histories*

As the new editor of *The Histories*, I was extremely worried about upholding the high standards of my predecessor, Victoria Valusek. She helped me learn how to create this amazing journal, which is not as easy job! I would like to thank her for being a mentor to me during her years at La Salle University.

In this edition, you, the reader, will find a plethora of works that straddle the span of world history. Included also are two honors theses that go in depth on very interesting subjects, the Newburgh Conspiracy and the artist Géricault. I think that this journal shows the wide range of interests of students here at La Salle. I would like to thank those students who took the time to write such amazing works and contribute them to my first edition.

I would like to especially thank Dr. Michael McInnes, the new moderator of *The Histories*. He has always been available to listen and help me whenever I needed it. I would also like to thank Dr. Stuart Leibiger, the Chair of the department. These two faculty members, along with the entire department, are integral in the creation of this publication because they taught these student writers how to research and write about history. I would also like to thank the department secretary, Jen Smith, for assisting with the technical problems that arose while creating this edition. Without them, this edition would be impossible.

Lauren De Angelis

Editor-In-Chief  
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