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Katherine Drapcho

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Book Review I

Setting the World Ablaze: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and the American Revolution

By John Ferling



Reviewed by Katherine Drapcho '10

In this ambitious and expansive work, John Ferling, a professor of History at the State University of West Georgia, chronicles the contributions to the revolution of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson: three key figures in America's founding and the first three presidents of the United States. Starting in their childhood and ending with perhaps a more accurate assessment of the end of the Revolutionary War (i.e., Washington surrendering his commission as commander of the Continental army to Congress), Ferling provides not only a narration of the lives of the three men, but also an evaluation of their performances during the turbulent years of America's founding.

Stylized as something of a triple biography of the three men during the revolution, Ferling structures the book chronologically, breaking it into three parts: their formation and early life, their participation in the struggle towards independence and war, and their contributions to final victory. Subsequently, Ferling devotes much of the book to a narrative of the actions of each individual during each time period, but also spends much time identifying similarities and differences in their actions, opinions, and ideas regarding the events of early America.

For instance, regarding their youth, Ferling notes that despite having different childhoods – Adams grew up as a middle-class New Englander while Jefferson and Washington enjoyed the privileges of the Virginian planter aristocracy – each of the men demonstrated that they were driven by a desire for personal independence, ambition, and fame and that, under the British colonial system, the possibility for achievement of colonists was limited. For example, despite heroic service in the French and Indian War, Washington was denied a commission in the British army. From the outset, Ferling provides this tension as an explanation for the future radicalism of each man regarding independence from Great Britain.

These men funneled their ambitions into their careers, as Washington established himself as a successful farmer and shrewd businessman while Adams and Jefferson became lawyers. Unlike Jefferson, whose law practice resulted from financial necessity, Adams pursued his legal career with energy and passion and became a renowned lawyer

in Boston. Adams's political ambitions also led him to sit on the Massachusetts colonial assembly. Ironically, Washington and Jefferson were also members of the Virginia House of Burgesses before the war, but both had an unexceptional pre-war legislative career, due to Washington's lackluster public-speaking capabilities and Jefferson's preoccupation in his personal affairs.

These successful, well-connected men were transformed into revolutionaries by different processes. As the British sought to tighten-down on the colonies following the French and Indian War, Washington viewed these new policies as a businessman and was concerned about the implications of British restrictions on his investments and Virginia's inability to control its future. While Adams disagreed with many of the British policies, he was terrified by the rioting in Boston and was wary of jeopardizing his career. Jefferson, as a member of the House of Burgesses, signed a boycott designed in protest against British policy.

Having been radicalized by British policy and popular unrest, each man moved towards independence. Washington and Adams were members of the First Continental Congress of 1774 and all three men were members of the Second Continental Congress of 1775, although Washington soon left to command the Continental army. In Congress, Adams emerged as a leading advocate of independence and, along with Jefferson, joined the committee responsible for drafting the Declaration of Independence.

Ferling's narration also follows the trials of Washington's military career throughout the war, highlighting his bloodless recapturing of Boston, the losses in New York and Pennsylvania, successes in New Jersey, the missed opportunity to destroy Clinton's army at Monmouth, and the ultimate victories against Cornwallis in the South. While Washington campaigned, Adams continued to serve in Congress and later was stationed as a diplomat in France. Despite pleas from Adams and Washington to rejoin Congress, Jefferson was elected as Virginia's governor, (being more interested in reforming Virginia than contributing to the national effort), and was the chief executive of the state when it was invaded by Benedict Arnold in 1780.

In his evaluation of each founder, Ferling concludes that Jefferson was the least committed and least capable of contributing to the revolutionary cause and that Washington and Adams, despite flaws and miscalculations, ultimately provided the "unflagging and altruistic dedication to the long struggle for independence" that early America required of its leaders (302). Ferling gives Washington a lukewarm review as a military commander, highlighting his many amateur mistakes, but claims that Washington's courage and commitment to the cause ultimately carried the day for the Continental army. Likewise, the tireless service of Adams (Ferling's clear favorite) in Congress and abroad helped make victory possible. On the other hand, Jefferson, according to Ferling, was an over-privileged recluse who was often unwilling to make the personal sacrifices necessary to contribute to the cause and, even when he did, did so rather reluctantly and without much success.

Ferling compromises the depth and quality of the information of his biography by expanding its breadth to include three figures. Because he must cover the actions of three people who, most of the time, resided in different places and did different things, he only provides a surface-level sketch of the actions and sentiments of each man. For an individual who knows little about the American Revolution or the early lives of the first three presidents, this book would be very informative. But for a student of American

history, this book has little to offer regarding factual information, but rather restates the well-known themes and facts of each man's life.

Regarding the quality of information, Ferling also makes many questionable factual statements. For example, he refers to Samuel Adams as a radical "leader of popular protest in Massachusetts," (70). However, Samuel Adams was, in reality, a relatively conservative political figure and the mass movement in Boston was precisely that: popular and without a leader. Additionally, regarding Valley Forge, he writes of the men "shivering and starving" and that "the vexed soldiers served with stoicism" (187). This statement is wrong for two reasons. First, while Valley Forge was a winter encampment, that winter was not particularly cold and second, many of the suffering soldiers at Valley Forge did protest their conditions. Also, Ferling claims that Washington's attack at Trenton was unanticipated by the Hessians. In reality, the Hessians expected one, having intelligence that informed them of an impending attack. Last, Ferling describes the movement for independence as a result of what "[Adams] and Congress had done," (137). However, in writing the Declaration, Jefferson claimed he created a mere "expression of the American mind," (135) and that the revolutionary process was not a product of five men, but the sentiment of a nation. These are all common misinterpretations of the Revolution, but make bad history nonetheless. These myths are debunked in either Ray Raphael's *Founding Myths* or David Hackett Fischer's *Washington's Crossing*.

Ferling's book succeeds in presenting a succinct description of each man's activities during the independence movement and Revolutionary War. While the narration jumps around from individual to individual, the book reads relatively fluidly and clearly. However, his treatment of each of the founders, and subsequent evaluation, is off-base. For example, Ferling pays particular attention to Washington's errors – his "fetish" for recapturing New York or his failure to properly reconnoiter when defending Manhattan, for example – but then reduces Washington's brilliant attack on Trenton as a product of "rage, vanity, and desperation," (146). Ferling comes down particularly hard on Jefferson and focuses on his disinterest in national affairs and his abysmal tenure as Virginia's governor, while ignoring or downplaying Jefferson's contributions to American political ideology or his service in the early republic.

Ferling explains his impetus for writing this triple biography as a reaction against social historians who focus, in his opinion, too much on political correctness and multiculturalism. He contends that, while studying social movements and the history of the politically and historically disenfranchised is not without merit, it is important to remember the leaders who inspired, communicated, and impacted the people whom they led. His book, therefore, is an attempt to return America's classic leading figures to the spotlight of early American history.

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