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'Our Father, the President'

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The Indian World of George Washington: The First President, the First Americans, and the Birth of the Nation
by Colin G. Calloway
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"The greatest Estates we have in this Colony," George Washington reminded an impoverished Virginia neighbor in 1767, "were made…by taking up and purchasing at very low rates the rich back Lands which were thought nothing of in those days, but are now the most valuable Lands we possess." From the earliest days, the British colonization of North America was a pell-mell land rush. Settlers, squatters, and speculators pushed unstoppably and aggressively west, all seeking land, whether by acquiring it cheaply or by grant or simply by grabbing it. But whose land was it? As far as the colonists were concerned, it was theirs, and as far as Native Americans were concerned, it was theirs and had been for centuries.

Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago/Art Resource

John James Barralet: Apotheosis of Washington, *showing Lady Liberty and an Indian figure mourning as George Washington ascends to heaven, circa 1802*

After Britain's victory in the French and Indian War in 1763 and France's cession to Britain of all its land east of the Mississippi, the British government faced the challenge of incorporating into its empire the territories it had acquired along with the Indian tribes that lived in them. It decided on a grand Solomonic stroke that it hoped would put an end to the land disputes between Indians and settlers and restore order on the frontier. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 placed a boundary down the spine of the Appalachian range. The vast lands west of the line—from the Appalachians north to the Great Lakes, west to the Mississippi River, and south to the Gulf of Mexico—were to remain Indian territory. Only the tribes could choose to sell their

land and only the king and his representatives could purchase it. All private individuals were prohibited from buying "any Lands reserved to the said Indians."

For his part, Washington viewed Britain's move to close off that entire western region as merely "a temporary expedient to quiet the Minds of the Indians." (Washington did not mention that the unspoken motive of British officials was to contain the American colonists east of the Appalachians in order to maintain imperial control.) Given the land hunger of men like himself who had made fortunes in speculation, he predicted that the Proclamation "must fall of course in a few years." The royal governor of the colony of Virginia, the Earl of Dunmore, who had made a fortune of his own in real estate when he served as governor of New York, concurred, grasping what the London government did not: that no proclamation could curb "the emigrating Spirit of the Americans."

In *The Indian World of George Washington*, Colin Calloway, an eminent scholar of Native American history, links 1763 to 1776, arguing that the Proclamation of 1763 marked the first step in the colonists' alienation from the British Empire and their march toward independence. Driving the American Revolution, he contends, was not only an idealistic thirst for liberty: it was also a materialistic hunger for land—and a defiant rejection of Britain's attempt to protect the integrity of Indian lands. Indeed, among the many accusations against King George III in the Declaration of Independence was that he raised the conditions "of new Appropriations of Lands."

George Washington is undoubtedly the dominant figure in the formative events of American nation-building, and Calloway emphasizes that in order to fully understand him, historians must not ignore the vital part that Native Americans played in his life as well as in the history of the young nation. In fact, Native Americans take center stage in his sweeping and deeply researched study. He dismisses the old Eurocentric stereotypes of Indians as savages, whether bloodthirsty or noble, and instead dives into the tremendous complexity of eighteenth-century America and its diverse cultures. He searches for Native Americans' own voices as they desperately struggled to defend and preserve their autonomy, land, communities, and traditions against white America's inexorable drive to spread onto their soil. Combining political, social, military, and diplomatic history, an undertaking that poses significant narrative challenges, he develops a maze of unremitting violent confrontations, multitribal confederacies and gatherings, cooperative trade agreements, currents of coexistence, deceitful land deals, diplomatic negotiations, amicably signed treaties, overt bribes, and grim betrayals.

Calloway offers no less complex a portrait of Washington. On the one hand, he recognizes that Washington was sympathetic to the Indians' plight, based on his considerable experience interacting with powerful Indian leaders during the French and Indian War. For Washington, Indians could never be mere abstractions. Calloway also notes that in August 1789, the well-intentioned new president told Congress that "a due regard should be extended to those Indian Tribes whose happiness, in the course of events, so materially

depends on the national justice and humanity of the United States." But on the other hand, he depicts Washington as an imperialist, coldly committed to national expansion onto Indian lands and willing to inflict severe punishment, if not extinction, on defiant and combative tribes. Ultimately, Calloway seems unsure if the story he seeks to tell is a true tragedy or a morality play designed to affirm our own twenty-first-century sense of superiority.

The Declaration of Independence's indictment of the king included the allegation that he had inflicted "on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages." And yet the first Indians to fight in the Revolutionary War fought on the side of the colonists, and even some who had fought with the British during the French and Indian War decided to support the Americans. Perhaps it was because, as Calloway suggests, the idealistic rhetoric of the Revolution offered them the prospect of recapturing their land. "If we are victorious, we hope you will help us recover our just Rights," Captain Solomon Uhhaunauwaunmut, a leader of the western Massachusetts Stockbridge community, told commissioners sent by the Continental Congress in 1775. Members of the Oneida Nation, one of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederation, contributed to the American victory in the Battle of Saratoga and a few months later carried corn to Washington's starving troops at Valley Forge.

Other Iroquois tribes, however, sided with the redcoats, believing that the Proclamation of 1763 demonstrated Britain's commitment to protecting Native land and that the Americans, as one Mohawk chief said, "began this Rebellion to be sole Masters of the Continent." When Iroquois warriors attacked settlers in Pennsylvania and western New York in 1778, Washington demanded iron-fisted retribution. "The immediate objects are the total destruction and devastation of their settlements," he ordered Major General John Sullivan, "and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible." A possible motive for this brutality? After more than forty towns were obliterated, cornfields destroyed, and, as a Seneca scholar later wrote, "ruin was spread like a blanket over the Iroquois country," Americans could claim for themselves the fertile lands in upstate New York.

But during Washington's presidency, both he and Secretary of War Henry Knox, whose department oversaw Indian affairs, were extremely reluctant to tarnish the ideals and reputation of the young republic; it was vitally important for the nation, Knox wrote in 1789, to be "solicitous of establishing its character on the broad basis of justice." Moreover, "Indians possess the natural rights of man," he underscored. And so, as the American experiment began, Washington and Knox sought to balance realism—the continuing and inescapable expansion of the nation onto Indian lands—and morality—a legal and ethical policy in dealing with Native tribes. Knox advocated a two-part plan: first, recognition that Indian lands must be preserved and protected since, as he wrote, Indians "derive their subsistence chiefly by hunting"; and second, an attempt to encourage among them an appreciation for land ownership and cultivation of the soil so that they might come to value an agrarian way of life within sovereign enclaves or homelands and, one day, even embrace assimilation into American society.

Knox proposed regularizing the relationship between the US government and the native tribes by acknowledging them as foreign, sovereign nations and not as subjects of individual states, though the Indian nations were nevertheless subject to the ultimate sovereignty of the United States. Relations with them would be conducted through negotiations and mutually acceptable treaties, with the advice and consent of Congress. What the Native Americans wanted from this policy was protection. "Father," the Illinois chief Jean Baptiste DuCoigne told Washington, "Order your people to be just. They are always trying to get our lands.... Keep them then on one side of the line, and us on the other."

One of the first tests of Knox's guidelines was the new government's diplomatic outreach to the Creek Nation, which Calloway describes as a "loose confederacy of fifteen to twenty thousand ethnically and linguistically diverse people living in more than fifty autonomous towns." Allied with the Seminoles, the Creeks dominated much of the South, from northern Florida to western Georgia to eastern Mississippi. As elsewhere, white settlers and speculators were aggressively encroaching on their land. Shortly after Washington's inauguration, the Cherokee chiefs wrote to the president and the members of Congress, appealing to their "humanity and compassion" and pleading that the Americans

> not divest us of our rights and possessions, which our ancient fathers and predecessors have enjoyed time out of mind.... If our Country is all taken from us we shall not be able to raise our children, neither is there any place left for us to remove to.

In late August 1789, Washington informed the Senate that hostilities between the "disorderly white people" of Georgia and the Creek Nation posed a serious risk to the "future tranquility of the State of Georgia, as well as of the United States." He therefore hoped to conclude a treaty with the Creek chiefs with the object of conciliating them and their thousands of warriors and, as he wrote, "attaching the Creeks to the Government of the United States." After a first round of negotiations in Creek country ended in a stalemate, Washington invited the Creek chief Alexander McGillivray to New York, the nation's temporary capital, to pursue negotiations in person.

On horseback and in Indian dress, accompanied by more than two dozen Creek chiefs, McGillivray made the thousand-mile trek to New York, arriving in July 1790 to the auspicious sounds of church bells, cheering crowds, and cannon fire. Over the course of the next three weeks, a flurry of conferences and lavish dinners took place. "We hope good from this visit," wrote Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. "The Creek savages," Abigail Adams reported to her sister, "are very fond of visiting us as we entertain them kindly, and they behave with much civility."

Finally, the Americans and the Creeks agreed on the articles of the Treaty of New York: the Creeks ceded to Georgia the lands east of the Oconee River; in return, the US gave back to the Creeks the lands south of the Altamaha River and promised military protection for the

remaining property of the Creek nation; the government bestowed "certain pecuniary considerations" and "honorary military distinctions" on the influential chiefs; and the Creeks promised allegiance to the United States. On August 13, 1790, the carefully orchestrated signing ceremony took place in Federal Hall. Tobias Lear, the president's secretary, read the treaty aloud for the assembled guests—Washington, Jefferson, Knox, Creek chiefs, members of the Cabinet and Congress, ambassadors, and others. Then Washington rose: "he supplicated the great spirit, the Master of their breath, to forbid an infringement of a Contract, formed under such happy auspices." McGillivray also gave a short speech, and the two parties signed the treaty. Gifts were exchanged, the Creeks sang songs of peace, and the president invited his guests to a grand dinner at his house. The first treaty made under the new Constitution had been happily concluded.

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Engraving of Hoboithle Mico, a leader of the Creeks, based on a drawing by John Trumbull. Trumbull sketched several members of the Creek delegation during their visit to New York in 1790.

"This event," a generally pleased George Washington wrote to his friend Lafayette, "will leave us in peace from one end of our borders to the other, except where it may be interrupted by a small refugee banditti of Cherokees and Shawnee, who can be easily chastised or even extirpated if it shall become necessary." Calloway offers a harsh interpretation of those words: "Peace and justice if possible, extermination if necessary." But ten years earlier, Washington had also used the verb "extirpate" (derived from the Latin word for "uproot") in describing Sullivan's mission against the Iroquois Nations: he wrote that he expected Sullivan to "destroy their Settlements & extirpate them from the Country which more than probable will be effected by their flight as it is not a difficult matter for them to take up their Beds and Walk." Destruction of settlements and forced displacement of Native Americans, yes; "extermination" or genocide, no.

Despite all the sincere efforts at negotiations and all the warm clasping of hands, the vision of harmony and peace embodied in the Treaty of New York did not hold. Its ideals proved no match for the continuous flow of settlers from Georgia into Creek territory. Under this duress, within two years, the Creeks renounced the treaty. Since Spain dominated America west of the Mississippi, it was the Spanish to whom McGillivray turned. With the Treaty of New Orleans in the summer of 1792, he formed an alliance with Spain to expel white settlers from Creek lands.

The Washington-Knox policy of treating Indian tribes as sovereign nations had little success elsewhere. The 1791 Treaty of Holston secured an agreement from the Cherokees to

relinquish 2.6 million acres of land in return for annuity payments and the government's promise to expel squatters from Cherokee territory. "When we left our father, the President, and General Knox, my heart was easy," said one satisfied and relieved Cherokee chief. Within months, however, the Cherokees, like the Creeks, found that the US government could not keep its promises. "Congress are Liars general washington is a Liar," declared another Cherokee chief. In 1793, after a dozen Cherokee Indians were murdered and wounded, Washington remarked that peace on the frontiers could not be expected "so long as a lawless set of unprincipled [white] wretches can violate the rights of hospitality or infringe the most solemn treaties, without receiving the punishment they so justly merit."

But the nation lacked sufficient military and financial resources to protect borders and keep the promises it made to Native Americans. In 1789, there were fewer than six hundred regular troops on the frontiers, and many of them were raw recruits who often deserted, their weapons in poor repair and with supply routes that barely existed. That year, Knox had calculated the expense of recruiting, training, paying, feeding, and equipping hundreds more soldiers and officers. It would require, he wrote, "the sum of two hundred thousand Dollars —A sum far exceeding the ability of the United States to advance consistently with a due regard to other indispensable objects." Nevertheless, during Washington's presidency, "the bulk of the federal budget," Calloway points out, "was spent in wars against Indians."

One of the few successful agreements between the national government and Native Americans was the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua, which established "peace and friendship" between the United States and the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. The treaty confirmed the boundaries of Oneida, Cayuga, and Onondaga lands in New York, and the Americans restored some territory to the Senecas. The Oneidas had felt especially aggrieved; although they had assisted Washington in the Revolutionary War, they had seen their homeland dwindle from five million acres to just a quarter of a million acres. And so a second, separate treaty was signed, awarding them compensation for their services during the Revolution. To this day, the Canandaigua Treaty is commemorated and celebrated every year and remains for Iroquois people, as Calloway notes, a clear recognition of Iroquois sovereignty and "the seminal document in their relationship with the United States."

Then again, the Treaty of Greenville proved a memorable fiasco. It was signed in 1795 by Americans and the twelve tribes of the Western Confederacy in the Great Lakes region, after several years of bloody warfare. In 1791, General Arthur St. Clair's assault on those tribes in northwest Ohio had turned into a rout that left almost all of St. Clair's officers and soldiers killed or wounded, a disastrous loss that spurred the creation of a standing federal army. The first article of the Treaty of Greenville hopefully announced that "henceforth all hostilities shall cease; peace is hereby established, and shall be perpetual." The treaty's other articles called for the tribes in the Western Confederacy to give up much of their land and agree upon a new boundary, while assuring them that they had the right to their remaining lands and "to enjoy them, hunting, planting and dwelling thereon so long as they please, without

any molestation from the United States." The tribes also received $20,000 in goods and were required to "acknowledge themselves to be under the protection of the said United States, and no other power whatever." One Sandusky Wyandots chief obliged. "We do now, and will henceforth, acknowledge the fifteen United States of America to be our father," he stated. That year, Washington wrote of his hope that the government would continue to make similar "fair treaties" and that "these treaties shall be held sacred, and the infractors on either side punished exemplarily."

But the Greenville boundary line, Calloway comments, proved "no more effective in checking American expansion than the Proclamation Line of 1763." Despite Washington's humane intentions, Native Americans continued to pay the price for the country's westward expansion, and treaties ultimately proved a futile exercise. "They, poor wretches, have no Press thro' which their grievances are related; and it is well known, that when one side only of a Story is heard, and often repeated, the human mind becomes impressed with it, insensibly," a sympathetic and insightful Washington wrote in 1795, effectively acknowledging that he was powerless to enforce a just accommodation with America's indigenous population. By 1796, he had become even more disillusioned. "I believe scarcely any thing short of a Chinese Wall, or a line of Troops," he dejectedly told his secretary of war, "will restrain Land Jobbers, and the Incroachment of Settlers, upon the Indian Territory."

If trying to segregate natives from whites didn't work, there was the second prong of Knox's strategy: assimilation. For most Indians, rights in land were communal, not individual. But what if Native Americans were educated and socialized, as Knox had proposed, to have "a love for exclusive property"? As property owners, he hypothesized, they would come to prefer the stability of an agrarian way of life to the nomadic existence of hunter-gatherers—and require less land. Knox believed that he was offering an Enlightenment design that would gratify, as he wrote, "a philosophic mind," for it consisted of imparting "our Knowledge of cultivation and the arts, to the Aboriginals of the Country by which the source of future life and happiness had been preserved and extended." Though Knox did not say it, his vision of assimilation implied that, in the long run, the only way Indians could survive as a people in the United States was to cease being Indians.

The channels that Washington and Knox envisaged in order to carry out this plan included federal agents who would protect the Indian tribes' boundaries against encroachment, supply them with farm tools and cattle, and help educate their children in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Religious groups like the Quakers assisted the government; they taught their Indian neighbors agricultural techniques and animal husbandry, hoping to instill in them a Protestant work ethic. At least some Natives were attracted by that vision. In 1791, the Seneca chief Cornplanter requested that Washington and Knox

> teach us to plow and to grind corn; to assist us in building saw mills…so that we may make our houses more comfortable and durable;… and above all that you will teach our children to read and write, and our women to spin and weave.

By 1800 Cornplanter had constructed a sawmill as well as a house for his family. As for the Cherokees, Calloway writes that they "built a modern Indian nation, adopting American-style agriculture, a written language, and a written constitution modeled on that of the United States." The Cherokee chief John Ross, born in 1790, would name one of his sons after George Washington and would credit the first president with setting the Cherokees on the road to becoming, as he put it, a "civilized Christian people."

Virginians like Washington had long mythologized agrarian life. After all, Thomas Jefferson maintained that "those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God," adding that "corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example." And just before a bone-tired Washington retired from the presidency, in a solemn address to the Cherokee people, he emphasized that the path he wished "all the Indian nations to walk" was the same one he yearned to resume at Mt. Vernon. "Beloved Cherokees," he wrote. "What I have recommended to you I am myself going to do. After a few moons are passed, I shall leave the great town, and retire to my farm." There he would attend to increasing his livestock, growing his crops, and employing women in spinning and weaving, "all which I have recommended to you, that you may be as comfortable & happy as plenty of food, cloathing & other good things can make you." Many Cherokees, Creeks, Chickasaws, and Choctaws did accommodate themselves to American ways. Not only did they embrace literacy in English, European clothing, furniture, plowed fields, and fenced property, they also copied Americans in buying and owning slaves. "By the time Washington died," Calloway remarks, "many Creeks and Cherokees held and regarded African slaves much as their white neighbors did."

Calloway is deeply ambivalent about Washington's part in the Indian world, including his unsuccessful efforts to protect Indian territory and his wish to steer Native Americans toward assimilation into white society. He does credit Washington with devoting "more time, thought, and ink" to questions of relations with Native Americans than most of his contemporaries and most other presidents and recognizes that Washington "saw his policies as setting Indians on the road to survival, not destruction, giving them the opportunity to remake themselves as American citizens." He also acknowledges that the president's "hopes, intentions, and policies to do something for Indian people could not compete with the human and economic forces arrayed against them."

But then comes a rainstorm of blame: he charges that "Washington spent a lifetime turning Indian homelands into real estate for himself and his nation"; that the first president set the United States on "an imperial path and a colonial relationship that plagued Indian people for generations to come"; that his agrarian vision and hope for eventual assimilation along with

his administration's failed treaties entailed "dismantling Indian ways of life to make way for American civilization"; and that his policies called for "complete cultural transformation." He also makes the questionable claim that the Knox and Washington plan "was just a step to educating Indian students to become members of the underclass," thereby linking their policies to the late-nineteenth-century boarding schools for Indians that stripped students of their Native identity and gave them an "education for extinction." And yet, as Calloway himself has shown, extinction was precisely the outcome that Washington and Knox had sought to avoid.

And then, after the downpour of judgmental censure, the skies clear, and Calloway concludes that American Indians have overall managed to fare rather well. Instead of adopting Washington's recipe for their survival, he writes, many adapted it. Instead of changing and ceasing to be Indians, they changed and continued to be Indians: "Instead of abandoning their traditions, cultures, and values, they built on their Native American past to give themselves an American future." He notes that the Senecas in western New York, for example, borrowed from Quaker teachings to build a new Iroquois religion and way of life, that they adopted American technology, farmed, lived in log homes, worked in the market economy, and sent their children to school, all the time preserving their beliefs and values, their kinship ties, and their customs,

> maintaining an unchanging core beneath the surface of change… They took some of what [Washington] offered, kept what they could of their old ways, and created new ways to be who they were. Indian societies shuddered under the shock of assault, and then held.

Native tribes have not disappeared into American society, and "their sovereignty was never extinguished."

For the fraught history of cruel wars and crushed hopes, for the assaults on the rights and resources of native peoples that continue to this day, many white Americans must carry the guilt and share the blame. But within this relentlessly depressing story line, George Washington is arguably an exception. Indeed, based on the evidence that Calloway provides, he was the only prominent founder to invest his enormous prestige in a just solution to America's Native American dilemma. And in the end, even Calloway concedes that "the nation-to-nations relationship between the federal government and Indian tribes today in some ways resembles that which Washington, in many of his writings and some of his policies, aspired to establish." The pioneering anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan would have agreed. In 1851 he noted that in Iroquois belief there was no place for white men in the Indian heaven, "but an exception was made in favor of Washington."