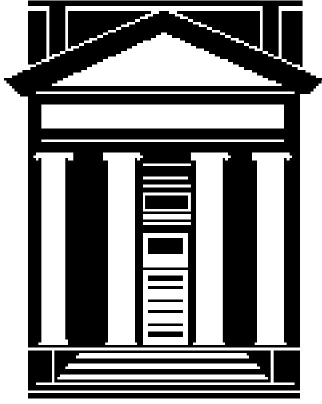

The Final Struggle between George Washington and the Grim King: Washington's Attitude toward Death and an Afterlife

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THE FINAL STRUGGLE BETWEEN GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE GRIM KING

Washington's Attitude toward Death and an Afterlife

by PETER R. HENRIQUES*

THE final year of the eighteenth century witnessed the deaths of Virginia's two most popular and beloved heroes—Patrick Henry and George Washington. Patrick Henry, suffering from severe intestinal blockage, met his death in June with the courage of a convinced Christian. More than a decade earlier he had consoled his sister on the death of her husband: "This is one of the trying scenes, in which the Christian is eminently superior to all others and finds a refuge that no misfortunes can take away." Confronting his own imminent demise, Henry used his confidence in boldly facing death as a means of testifying to his skeptical physician about the truth of the Christian religion. He believed he would go to a place where "sorrow never enters." According to his second wife's account of his final scene, "He met death with firmness and in full confidence that through the merits of a bleeding saviour that his sins would be pardoned."[1]

Six months later George Washington died an even more painful death and faced his ordeal with a courage every bit equal to that demonstrated by Patrick Henry. Yet, unlike Henry, Washington did not draw his courage from a Christian concept of redemption and the hope of eternal bliss

* Peter R. Henriques is an associate professor of history at George Mason University. He would like to thank James M. Elson, Frank E. Grizzard, Jr., Marlene Henriques, Barbara McMillan, Judy Pierce, Jack D. Warren, Rosemarie Zagarri, and the two outside readers for the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* for their help in completing this essay. He presented an earlier version of the essay at the annual George Washington Symposium at Mount Vernon on 7 November 1998.

[1] Patrick Henry to Anne Henry Christian, 15 May 1786, in William Wirt Henry, *Patrick Henry: Life, Correspondence and Speeches* (3 vols., 1891; New York, 1969), 2:286–87 (first quotation); Patrick Henry to Bartholomew Dandridge, 21 Jan. 1785, in ibid., 2:252 (second quotation); Dorothea Dandridge Henry to Elizabeth Henry Aylett, n.d. (but probably written from Red Hill shortly after Patrick Henry's death), Patrick Henry Memorial Association, Brookneal, Va. (third quotation). James M. Elson's article, "The Death of Patrick Henry," summarizes these events (Patrick Henry Essay No. 2–98, *Newsletter of the Red Hill Patrick Henry National Memorial* [May 1996], unpaginated).

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Junius Brutus Stearns (1810–1885), American, Washington on His Deathbed, *1851, oil on canvas (37 x 54 1/8 in.), Gift of Robert Badenhop, 1954.16, Dayton Art Institute*

In the closing hours of 14 December 1799, George Washington died in the presence of his wife, his secretary, two physicians, his white housekeeper, and four slaves. Although Junius Brutus Stearns's powerful composition expresses the tender concern of Tobias Lear and accurately places Martha Washington at the foot of the bed, the artist has replaced the servants with three of Mrs. Washington's grandchildren.

through the sacrifice of Christ. A thorough examination of Washington's religious views, which have been hotly debated,[2] is beyond the scope of this essay, but a careful examination of the way he faced death and what he wrote to others at times of their great personal grief sheds light on

[2] Because of Washington's centrality to American history, people with diametrically opposed views on religion have claimed Washington as one of their own. Within the Christian right, Washington is sometimes portrayed as a born-again fundamentalist. Tim LaHaye ended his treatment of Washington in *Faith of Our Founding Fathers* (Brentwood, Tenn., 1987) with the assertion "that were George Washington living today, he would freely identify with the Bible-believing branch of evangelical Christianity that is having such a positive influence on our nation" (p. 113). See also D. James Kennedy, "The Faith of Washington" (sermon), n.d., "George Washington and Religion" file, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, Mount Vernon, Va. (hereafter cited as ViMtvL). On the other hand, and with no more validity, freethinkers argue that Washington should rightly be viewed as one of them. Good examples of this position are Franklin Steiner, *The Religious Beliefs of Our Presidents* (Amherst, N.Y., 1995); and John E. Remsburg, *Six Historic Americans: Paine, Jefferson, Washington, Franklin, Lincoln, Grant, the Fathers and Saviors of Our Republic, Freethinkers* (New York, 1906). Still the best overview of the subject is Paul F. Boller, Jr.'s *George Washington & Religion* (Dallas, 1963). See also Mary Thompson, "George Washington and Religion," research

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Washington's attitude toward death and an afterlife and gives insight into his character.

George Washington's brief fatal illness in December of 1799 came suddenly and with little warning, but it was not unexpected. Although it would be incorrect to aver, as one historian has, that Washington was "haunted by premonitions of death,"[3] there is no question that it was often on his mind, especially in the last years of his life and when he was not involved in important activities. He was acutely aware that he was from a short-lived family, that he was approaching the biblical life span of three score and ten, that he was worn out from a lifetime of service, that his remaining days could "not be many," and that his "glass was almost run."[4] A constant image in his later correspondence is that of gently drifting down the stream of life.[5] When his sole surviving brother, Charles, died earlier in 1799, Washington wrote, "I was the *first*, and am now the *last*, of my fathers Children by the second marriage who remain. when I shall be called upon to follow them, is known only to the giver of life. When the summons comes I shall endeavour to obey it with a good grace."[6]

paper in possession of the author and in briefer form at ViMtvL; and North Callahan, *Thanks, Mr. President: The Trail-Blazing Second Term of George Washington* (New York and London, 1991), pp. 65–72. Richard Brookhiser stressed Washington's desire to "borrow what was useful in Christianity for the United States" (Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* [New York, London, and Toronto, 1996], pp. 144–50 [quotation on p. 149]). Although not a communicant, Washington was a lifelong member of the Anglican-Episcopal church and for a time a vestryman. Still, as Dorothy Twohig has noted, Washington's "interest in religion appears always to have been perfunctory" (Dorothy Twohig, "The Making of George Washington," in Warren R. Hofstra, ed., *George Washington and the Virginia Backcountry* [Madison, Wis., 1998], p. 19). Washington's "faith was as aloof as the man who harbored it" (Edwin S. Gaustad, *Faith of Our Fathers: Religion and the New Nation* [San Francisco, 1987], p. 77). Washington once wrote, "[I]n religion my tenets are few and simple" (George Washington to James Anderson, 24 Dec. 1795, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799* [39 vols.; Washington, D.C., 1931–44], 34:407). Any attempt to connect Washington closely to orthodox Christian thinking must take into account the complete lack of reference to Jesus (or Christ) in his private correspondence.

[3] James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington: Anguish and Farewell (1793–1799)* (Boston and Toronto, 1969), p. 341. Flexner implies this concern was characteristic of Washington throughout his adult life (James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* [Boston and Toronto, 1974], p. 47).

[4] George Washington to Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, marquis de Lafayette, 8 Dec. 1784, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 28:7; Douglas Southall Freeman et al., *George Washington: A Biography* (7 vols.; New York, 1948–57), 7:582; George Washington to the marquis de Lafayette, 8 Oct. 1797, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 36:41 (first quotation); George Washington to Sarah Cary Fairfax, 16 May 1798, in ibid., 36:263; quoted in Willard Sterne Randall, *George Washington: A Life* (New York, 1997), p. 499 (second quotation).

[5] Among many examples, see George Washington to the marquis de Lafayette, 1 Feb. 1784, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 27:318; George Washington to Henry Knox, 25 Feb. 1787, in ibid., 29:170; and George Washington to Robert Morris, 5 May 1787, in ibid., 29:211.

[6] George Washington to Burgess Ball, 22 Sept. 1799, in ibid., 37:372.

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It was extremely important to Washington to meet death with "good grace." For much of Washington's adult life, he was in one sense or another playing a role—the classical republican general, the patriot king, the father of his country. The desire for the approbation of the people—properly earned through disinterested service for the common good—lay very close to the core of Washington's being. He hoped that in facing death he would do nothing to sully the reputation he had spent a lifetime building.[7]

Certainly, Washington's courage in the face of the prospect of death, stoical in nature from whatever source it was drawn, was one of the trademarks of his life. At the age of seventeen, young Washington owned an outline in English of the principal *Dialogues of Seneca the Younger*. One of the chapter headings was, "The Contempt of Death makes all the Miseries of Life Easy to Us." Seneca also wrote, "He is the brave man ... that can look death in the face without trouble or surprise."[8] In classical stoicism, the true stoic may fall victim to circumstances beyond his control, suffer and perhaps die, but his superior control over his passions calls forth admiration and leads to a reaffirmation of the dignity of man.

Washington displayed a stoic's contempt for death, an attitude that awed his contemporaries. His response to his baptism by fire, which triggered the start of the French and Indian War in 1754, was, "I heard Bulletts whistle and believe me there was something charming in the sound." Published in England, it reportedly drew a reaction even from King George II.[9] During the French and Indian War, Washington ignored threats from angry frontiersmen "to blow out my brains," put his life at extreme risk by going between his soldiers and knocking up their guns with his sword after they accidentally opened fire on each other, and offered to "die by inches" a horrible death if it would stop the suffering in the backcountry he was sworn to protect. He wrote truthfully, if with a touch of arrogance, "I have ... [the] resolution to Face what any Man durst."[10]

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[7] The idea of Washington playing a role is well developed in Paul K. Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1988), esp. pp. 52, 202–11. See also Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992), pp. 205–10.

[8] Sir Roger L'Estrange, ed., *Seneca's Morals: By Way of Abstract*... (1682; New York, 1930), p. 10 (quotation); Samuel Eliot Morison, "The Young Man Washington," in James Morton Smith, ed., *George Washington: A Profile*, American Profiles (New York, 1969), p. 46. Morison credits the Fairfax family as the key influence on Washington and declares they fell in the tradition of eighteenth-century Whig gentry who conformed outwardly to Christianity but derived their real inspiration from the stoic philosophers. Although this characterization may be true, it is worth noting that William Fairfax once considered becoming an Anglican clergyman and that his son, Bryan, did take holy orders.

[9] George Washington to John Augustine Washington, 31 May 1754, in W. W. Abbot et al., eds., *The Papers of George Washington: Colonial Series* (10 vols.; Charlottesville, 1983–95), 1:118. The king commented that Washington would not say so if he had heard many (ibid., 1:119 n. 1).

[10] George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, 11 Oct. 1755, in ibid., 2:102 (first quotation); Rosemarie Zagarri, ed., *David Humphreys' "Life of General Washington" with George Washington's "Remarks"* (Athens, Ga., and London, 1991), p. 22; George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, 22

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Mount Vernon Ladies' Association

The Washingtons' bedroom at Mount Vernon also served as Martha Washington's office, from which she directed the operations of the household. She kept vigil by this bedside throughout her husband's last, agonizing day on earth.

His legendary courage as commander in chief of the Continental Army might have worried his aides, but it inspired his men. His actions at Princeton and Monmouth, and his response to the falling shells at Yorktown, demonstrated a character seemingly immune from normal fear in the presence of death. So great was his courage that even his harshest critics never brought it into question.[11] So extreme was it that one biographer observed, "There is a streak of something close to a mad nature in a man whose instinctive reaction to near death is sheer exhilaration, who finds the whine of bullets 'charming,' and to whom the swirl of violence is a fine tonic that calms his nerves remarkably and serves to clear his head."[12]

Apr. 1756, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Colonial Series*, 3:33 (second quotation); George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, 29 May 1754, in ibid., 1:107 (third quotation).

[11] Freeman et al., *Washington*, 5:489. The description of Washington—"cool like a Bishop at his prayers"—by Roger Atkinson in 1774 seems particularly appropriate for Washington's actions under fire (quoted in ibid., 3:370 n. 148).

[12] Noemie Emery, *Washington: A Biography* (London, 1976), pp. 378–79. Washington was aware of and impressed by the idea of heroic death. Several paintings that hung in Mount Vernon's two dining rooms dealt with this theme: the death of Richard Montgomery, Bunker Hill, the death of James Wolfe, and the death of the earl of Chatham. See Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (Garden City, N.Y., 1984), pp. 174–75. The author thanks one of the outside readers for bringing this point to his attention.

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Washington's courage was sorely tested one last time in his final struggle with what he once referred to as "the grim King."[13] Thanks primarily to the invaluable accounts left by Washington's personal secretary, friend, and avid admirer, Tobias Lear, and augmented by a letter from his physicians, Dr. James Craik and Dr. Elisha Cullen Dick, published within days of his death, we have a good general sense of what happened during Washington's final illness, even though some details remain in dispute.[14] It is a story that has been repeated many times, though often the telling has concentrated on the calmness with which Washington faced his demise and in so doing has downplayed the horrific nature of Washington's last day on earth.

Death was not likely to have been on Washington's mind as he went out to check on his farms on Thursday, 12 December 1799. His recent health had never been better, he was making various plans for the future, and he had even signed a jocular pact not to die until the dawn of the new century. Washington remained outside for approximately five hours despite the fact that "the weather was very disagreeable, a constant fall of rain, snow and hail with a high wind."[15]

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[13] George Washington to Richard Washington, 20 Oct. 1761, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Colonial Series*, 7:80. Although Washington used this phrase only once, it fit with his later reference to death "snatching" people. The "Grim King" was a popular ballad. Air 8 in *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) is entitled "Grim King of the Ghosts."

[14] On Tobias Lear, see John Knowlton, "Tobias Lear and George Washington: In Support of Greatness" (M.A. thesis, University of Maine, 1967). A rather unsympathetic account may be found in Ray Brighton, *The Checkered Career of Tobias Lear* (Portsmouth, N.H., 1985). Lear left two accounts, a "journal" entry written on 15 December and a longer "diary" account compiled later in the month. Dr. James Craik later endorsed the larger "diary" account as accurate "so far as I can recollect." Although there are slight differences and discrepancies between the two versions, the second, longer narrative appears to have been an effort to expand and augment the one set down very shortly after Washington's death so as to include more information while it was fresh in Lear's memory. How much credence to give Lear's account is, of course, a major consideration. Clearly, he sanitized Washington's death and downplayed the agonizing aspects of it. Jack D. Warren sees Lear's account as a death narrative attempting to uphold the ideal of republican sacrifice. The sacrifice and death of revolutionary heroes—Joseph Warren, Richard Montgomery, and Hugh Mercer, perhaps the most celebrated—ensured their immortality. Although Washington was fated to die in bed and was denied a hero's death on the battlefield, Lear provided one for him (Jack D. Warren to the author, 1 Feb. 1999). Although Lear had several purposes in writing his accounts, they have the ring of truth about them, even if they may be incomplete and incorrect in some details. There is a tremendous vividness to a deathbed scene such as Lear witnessed. He wrote about it immediately, including in a private letter to his mother, which he told her not to make public. His account was supported by Craik. Washington had demonstrated remarkable courage throughout his life, was very much aware of the concept of heroic death, knew this was his final act, and would have done everything he could, consistent with human reaction to pain and difficulty breathing, to end his life in a praiseworthy way. Such a death would be in keeping with Seneca's description of a stoic as a man "who, if his body were to be broken upon the wheel or melted lead poured down his throat, would be less concerned for the pain itself than for the dignity of bearing it" (L'Estrange, ed., *Seneca's Morals*, p. 10). It does not seem implausible that a man who demonstrated remarkable courage in life could exhibit that same quality facing a difficult and painful death. Lear's original "journal" account is at the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. His original "diary" account is owned by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Both documents are available on the Web at http://www.virginia.edu/gwpapers/exhibits/mourning/lear.html.

[15] Tobias Lear to Mary Stillson Lear, 16 Dec. 1799, copy in information file on George

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Apparently, at some time during his rounds, Washington was stricken with the virulent infection that quickly claimed his life. His remarkably hardy constitution in this case may have actually worked to his detriment. "Alas! He relied upon it too much and exposed himself without common caution to the heat in summer and cold in winter," lamented Thomas Law, the husband of Martha Washington's eldest granddaughter.[16] Despite getting soaked by the snow and rain, Washington did not change clothes before dinner. Already beginning to show signs of a cold and a sore throat Friday morning, and despite continued bad weather, he went out briefly in the afternoon to mark some trees he wanted to have cut down. By evening he was very hoarse but still in good spirits. He insisted on reading sections of the paper out loud to his wife, Martha, and secretary, Tobias Lear. Rejecting advice to take medication, he said of his cold, "Let it go as it came."[17] In retrospect, these actions exacerbated his condition.

Over the years there has been considerable debate on the nature of Washington's final illness. The latest and most convincing medical studies indicate that George Washington died from acute epiglottitis caused by a virulent bacteria, possibly *Hemophilus* influenza type b. The epiglottis is a cartilaginous plate located at the base of the tongue and at the entrance to the larynx, or voice box. It is at the entrance to the airway that goes through the larynx to the lungs. If it swells up, it can block the airway, and in extreme cases, in which the epiglottis is enlarged to ten times its normal size, a ball-valve mechanism develops when trying to draw in sufficient air. The symptoms exhibited during Washington's final illness—rapid onset, a severely sore throat, difficulty in swallowing, difficulty in speaking, increased airway obstruction, especially when leaning backward, a desire to assume a sitting position in spite of weakness, persistent restlessness, and finally an apparent improvement shortly before death—dovetail exactly with acute epiglottitis.[18]

Washington's death, ViMtvL (quotation); Martha Dandridge Custis Washington to Elizabeth Willing Powel, 18 Dec. 1797, in Joseph E. Fields, comp., *"Worthy Partner": The Papers of Martha Washington*, Contributions in American History, 155 (Westport, Conn., and London, 1994), p. 310.

[16] Thomas Law to Edward Law, first baron Ellenborough, 15 Dec. 1799, Papers of George Washington project, University of Virginia, Charlottesville (hereafter cited as ViU). This failure to take reasonable precautions about his health is reflected in the comment by a figure in a new historical novel about Washington: "He didn't know enough to come in out of the rain" (William Martin, *Citizen Washington: A Novel* [New York, 1999], p. 3).

[17] Tobias Lear, "journal" account (copy), ViMtvL.

[18] White McKenzie Wallenborn, "George Washington's Terminal Illness," Papers of George Washington project, ViU (available on-line at http://www.virginia.edu/gwpapers/exhibits/mourning/wallenborn.html); Heinz H. E. Scheidemandel, "Did George Washington Die of Quinsy?" *Archives of Otolaryngology* 102 (Sept. 1976): 519–21. The traditional diagnosis is quinsy, but Scheidemandel argues that in the short space of roughly twenty-one hours a peritonsillar abscess would not have produced total obstruction of the airway. Furthermore, there was no indication of swelling caused by an abscess. And although Washington had trouble speaking, he was not hoarse from a raspy throat. The symptoms simply fit together better for a diagnosis of acute epiglottitis rather than quinsy.

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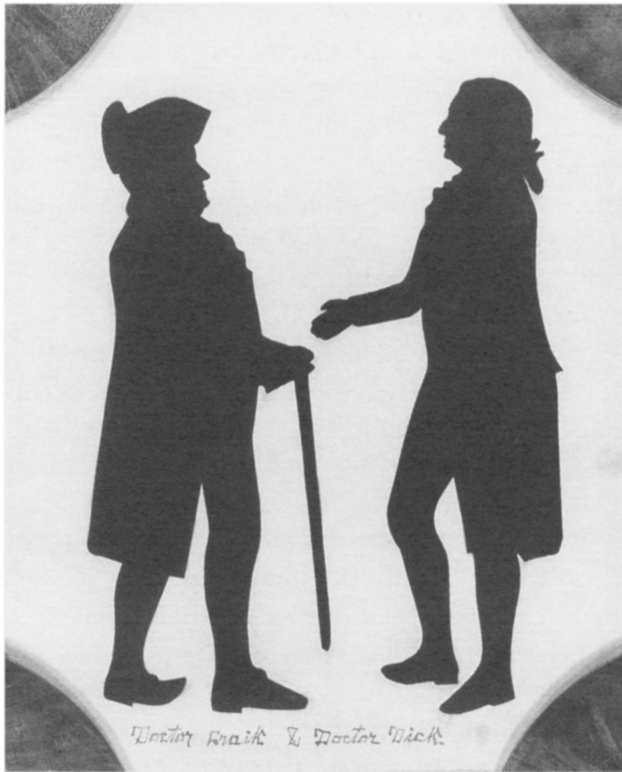

Richmond Academy of Medicine; Virginia Historical Society photograph

Dr. James Craik's friendship with Washington dated at least from 1754, when the Scottish native (1730–1814) was commissioned in the Virginia Regiment. He participated in Edward Braddock's campaign, which ended in disaster on the Monongahela. Dr. Elisha Cullen Dick (1762–1825) served several terms as mayor of Alexandria. Both men treated Washington during his final illness and wrote an account for the Alexandria *Times*.

By the early hours of Saturday morning, the disease had progressed so rapidly that Washington was very uncomfortable and had difficulty breathing. During the rest of the day—nearly twenty hours—George Washington slowly and painfully choked to death. In Lear's words, "He suffered extremely." "His distress, through the day, was extreme." "He appeared to be in great pain and distress, from the difficulty of breathing, and frequently changed his position in the bed" and tried to sit up.[19] (Sitting up and leaning forward minimizes the ball-valve effect from the enlarged epiglottis.) Sadly, the pain of constantly struggling for breath was significantly aggravated by the medical treatment given him.

Dr. James Craik, Washington's longtime personal physician and dear friend, arriving later on the morning of 14 December, immediately recognized the gravity of the situation and urged that another physician, Dr. Elisha Cullen Dick, be called in as a consultant. Martha Washington had earlier sent word to Dr. Gustavus Brown of Port Tobacco about the general's condition. Dick arrived about 3 P.M. and Brown shortly after.

[19] Tobias Lear to Lawrence Lewis, 15 Dec. 1799, copy in information file on Washington's death, ViMtvL; Tobias Lear to George Washington Parke Custis, 15 Dec. 1799, ibid.; Tobias Lear to Mary Stillson Lear, 16 Dec. 1799, ibid.; Tobias Lear, "journal" account (copy), ViMtvL.

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Although Washington received excellent care from the three attending physicians according to the accepted medical practice of the time, much of their treatment was in fact detrimental.[20]

During the course of less than twelve hours, George Washington was bled four different times and lost approximately five pints of blood. (Several accounts put the figure even higher.)[21] The first bleeding was ordered by the general himself, who was a firm believer in the efficacy of the procedure. Of course, the theory behind bleeding was to remove the diseased matter from the body. In fact, such excessive bloodletting severely weakened Washington. In addition, the aggressive treatment compromised his circulation. In acute epiglottitis, it is not difficult to expel air, but it is hard to inhale it and receive sufficient oxygen. As a result, the patient suffers from hypoxemia, deficient oxygenation of the blood. The significant loss of blood, at least one-half of Washington's total, further reduced his oxygen supply because the hemoglobin in the blood carries oxygen. The use of purgatives, by significantly reducing his body fluids, compounded the situation.[22]

Not only did the purgatives compromise circulation, but they also inflicted significant additional suffering. Two moderate doses of calomel, a white, tasteless medicine used as a purgative, were given, and an injection was administered. Later, ten more grains of calomel were prescribed, followed by repeated doses of emetic tartar totaling five or six grains. The result was a "copious discharge from the bowels." How much discomfort this would have inflicted on a man struggling for each breath is easier to imagine than to describe. Blistering added to the distress but did nothing to alleviate the situation. It is not surprising that Washington, who appeared to realize early on in the day that the disease would prove fatal, struggled valiantly to make his physicians aware that although he appreciated their efforts, he desired them to stop their ministrations. "[L]et me go off quietly," he asked.[23]

[20] Paul Leicester Ford, in *The True George Washington* (1896; Philadelphia, 1911), asserted "[t]here can be scarcely a doubt that the treatment of his last illness by the doctors was little short of murder" (p. 58). Certainly such a charge is unfair, given the state of medical knowledge at the time.

[21] It is difficult to estimate the amount of blood actually drawn. J. Worth Estes computes the amount at ninety-six ounces (J. Worth Estes, "Treating America's First Superhero," *Medical Heritage* 1 [Jan.–Feb. 1985]: 54 [copy in information file on Washington's death, ViMtvL]).

[22] Wallenborn, "Washington's Terminal Illness"; Scheidemandel, "Did Washington Die of Quinsy?" It is unclear whether the interior of Washington's throat was ever examined by his physicians. Although most scholars conclude it was not, use of the word "inflammatory" to describe Washington's throat suggests that one or more of the doctors did examine it. The author acknowledges the outside reader who brought this point to his attention.

[23] James Craik and Elisha C. Dick, account published in the *Times and Alexandria Advertiser*, 19 Dec. 1799 (copy in information file on Washington's death, ViMtvL; available on-line at http://www.virginia.edu/gwpapers/exhibits/mourning/craik.html); Tobias Lear, "journal" account (copy), ViMtvL.

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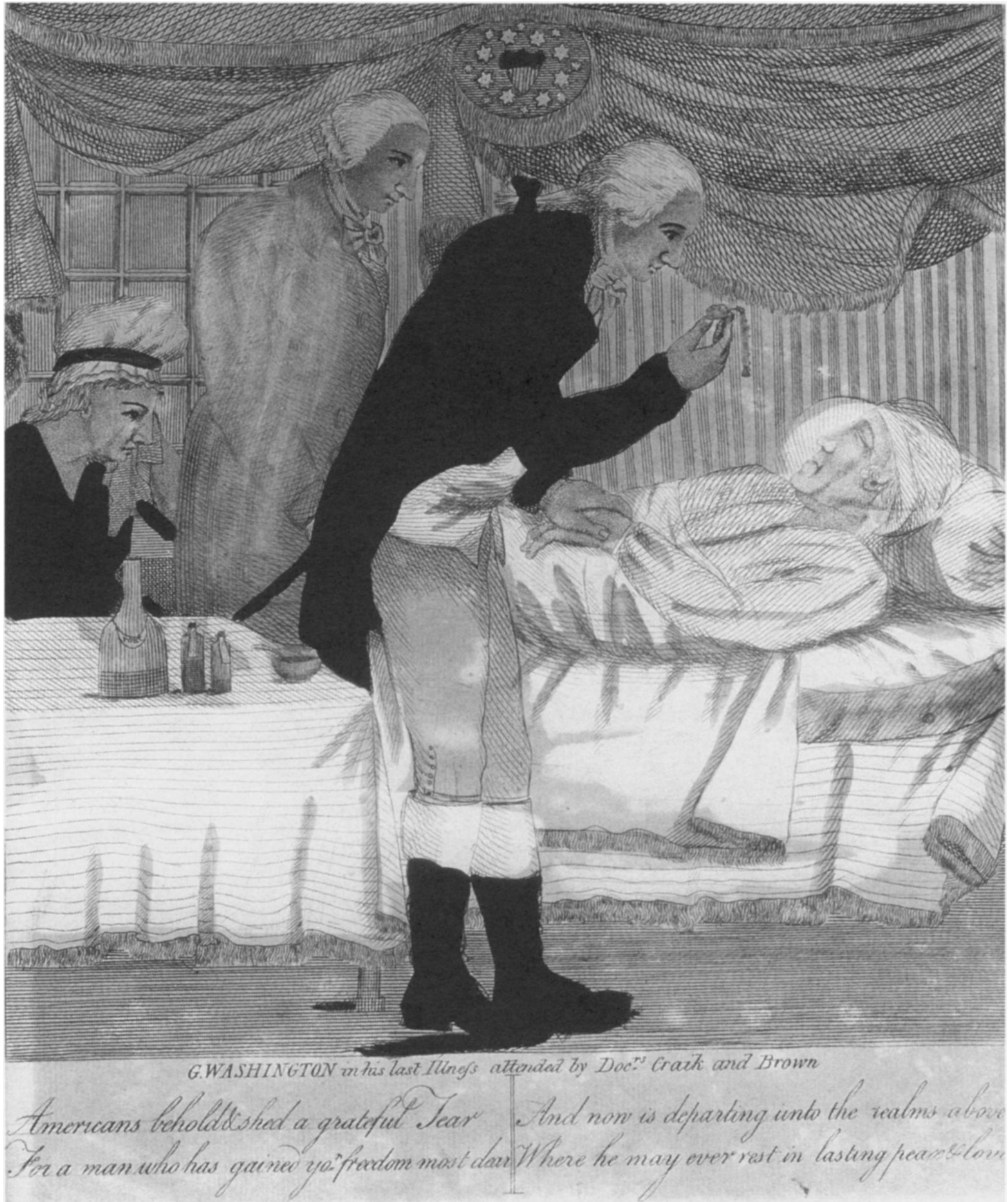

Library Company of Philadelphia

Dr. Gustavus Brown (1744–1801), like Craik a native of Scotland, was summoned to consult during Washington's last illness. The treatment prescribed by the first president's attending physicians, although standard for the time, increased the patient's suffering.

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Throughout the entire ordeal the general displayed remarkable fortitude and patience. According to Lear, "not a complaint escaped him."[24] Clearly, the symptoms surrounding his fatal illness were excruciating, and they were beyond Washington's power to change. Somehow, Washington kept his dignity despite the circumstances, which were anything but dignified.

While his courage, which was so much a part of his identity, shone brightly, other aspects of his character were highlighted during the ordeal as well. Lear wrote the following day, "He died as he lived." In the midst of his own personal agony, Washington's concern for others stands out. He refused to allow his wife to seek help in the middle of the night for fear she would take cold. He calmed the fears of the overseer, George Rawlins, who took the first blood. He apologized to Tobias Lear, who was helping move him to different positions in the general's endless quest for oxygen, and worried that the effort would fatigue Lear. He thanked his physicians for their heroic efforts. He urged his personal body servant, Christopher Scheels, who had been standing by the bed throughout the day, to sit down. These actions speak volumes about Washington's character.[25]

The authors of a major biography of Washington emphasized another aspect of his character. "The same self-discipline served George Washington as patient that had served him as a planter, as Commander-in-Chief, as President," wrote John Alexander Carroll and Mary Wells Ashworth. "Duty . . . was his governing principle. . . . Today, this 14th of December, 1799, he had responded as if clearly it was his duty not to deny the doctors and others their valiant efforts to restore him, unavailing though he believed them to be."[26]

George Washington was a man who liked to be in control, and, as death approached, he did what he could to ensure that what was important to him would be carried out after he was gone. He had his wife bring him two wills and made sure the old one was burned. His final testament was a massive document expressing his wishes on a great number of things. One of his very last requests, when speaking was done only with great pain and effort, involved his public and personal papers. As W. W. Abbot has demonstrated, these were of the utmost importance to him and to his perceived place in history.[27] His very last request to Lear was for Lear not to have him

[24] Tobias Lear to Mary Stillson Lear, 16 Dec. 1799, copy in information file on Washington's death, ViMtvL.

[25] Tobias Lear to William Augustine Washington, 15 Dec. 1799, in Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (14 vols.; New York and London, 1889–93), 14:257 (quotation); Tobias Lear, "journal" account (copy), ViMtvL. Citing many of these examples, Richard Brookhiser has noted, "Washington died the death of civility" (Brookhiser, *Founding Father*, p. 198).

[26] Freeman et al., *Washington*, 7:624.

[27] W. W. Abbot, "An Uncommon Awareness of Self: The Papers of George Washington," *Prologue* 21 (1989): 7–19.

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Washington's remains were interred in the family vault on 18 December 1799. The modest scale of Washington's final resting place aggrieved the president's stepgrandson, George W. P. Custis, who in 1812 called it "that HOLE, in which, by the God of Heaven, I would not even bury my faithful dog." A new tomb was completed in 1831.

American Antiquarian Society

buried until he had been dead for at least two days.[28] The idea of being buried alive was a more realistic concern then than it would be today, and apparently this thought, for a man always desiring control, was a very disquieting one. For whatever reason, his wish was clearly important to Washington because he wanted to make absolutely sure Lear understood him.

As the lack of oxygen becomes extreme in acute epiglottitis, a euphoric state develops that may be interpreted as improvement. Lear noted, "About ten minutes before he expired . . . his breathing became easier; he lay quietly;—he withdrew his hand from mine, and felt his own pulse."

[28] Tobias Lear, "journal" account (copy), ViMtvL. Lear's later "diary" account records "three days," which was more customary. Washington most likely said "two days," for that is what Lear wrote the day following the president's death and repeated in his letter to his mother on 16 December. Thomas Law, writing on the day after Washington died, quoted "two days" as well, either repeating what Lear told him or relying on Lear's account. See Tobias Lear, "diary" account (copy), ViMtvL; and Thomas Law to Edward Law, first baron Ellenborough, 15 Dec. 1799, Papers of George Washington project, ViU.

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Then the patient's expression changed, his hand fell, and sometime late in the evening of 14 December George Washington's life on earth was over.[29]

Did Washington see this physical death as the end of his life? How did Washington view death? Did he believe death the entryway to a better world? How did he think one should face death—one's own and those of friends and loved ones? Washington's answers to these questions may help us better understand his philosophy and what motivated his actions. Efforts to comprehend Washington's attitude toward death and an afterlife are complicated by the fact that he was reticent to discuss such issues and, as far as the record shows, never formulated a comprehensive view about them. The confusion is compounded because almost from the very moment of his death apologists sought to make Washington's position conform to their own. Despite these obstacles, a careful reading of Washington's correspondence and attention to what he said—and, equally important, to what he did not say—can help clarify these issues.

During his sixty-seven years of life, George Washington often had to face the death of relatives and friends close to him. Although no extant material records his reaction to the deaths of some people important to him, such as his father, Augustine, who died when Washington was only eleven, or his half brother, Lawrence, who died nine years later, there still is a significant corpus of evidence on this subject. Relevant correspondence preserves Washington's reactions to the deaths of such family members as his mother, Mary Ball Washington; his stepchildren, Patsy and Jacky Custis; his brothers, John Augustine Washington and Charles Washington; his sister, Betty Lewis; his nephew, George Augustine Washington; and his niece, Fanny Bassett Washington Lear; and such friends as Burwell Bassett's daughter and Bassett himself; General Nathanael Greene; Colonel Tench Tilghman; Patrick Henry; Henry Lee's first wife and daughter; Benjamin Lincoln's son; Henry Knox's son; William Pearce's daughter; and Archibald Cary's wife.[30]

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[29] Tobias Lear, "journal" account (copy), ViMtvL. A fourth physician, Dr. William Thornton, arrived shortly after Washington's demise and wanted to try to resuscitate him. "First . . . thaw him in cold water," he instructed, "then . . . lay him in blankets, and by degrees and by friction . . . give him warmth, . . . open a passage to the lungs by the trachea, and . . . inflate them with air, to produce an artificial respiration, and . . . transfuse blood into him from a lamb." Fortunately, this desecration of Washington's remains was not carried out (William Thornton, draft appended to essay "On Sleep," ca. 1822–25, in C. M. Harris and Daniel Preston, eds., *Papers of William Thornton*, vol. 1: *1781–1802* [Charlottesville and London, 1995], p. 528 [copy in information file on Washington's death, Papers of George Washington project, ViU; available on-line at http://www.virginia.edu/gwpapers/exhibits/mourning/thornton.html]).

[30] For Mary Ball Washington, see George Washington to Betty Washington Lewis, 13 Sept. 1789, in W. W. Abbot et al., eds., *The Papers of George Washington: Presidential Series* (8 vols. to date; Charlottesville and London, 1993–), 4:32; for Martha Parke Custis, see George Washington to Burwell Bassett, 20 June 1773, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Colonial Series*, 9:243; for John Parke Custis, see George Washington to the marquis de Lafayette, 15 Nov. 1781, in Fitzpatrick,

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Daniel Blake Smith has written, "A controlled style of bereavement—submission to God's authority with no 'affectation of overflowing grief'—remained the *ideal* way to confront family death throughout the eighteenth century." Kathleen M. Brown has concluded, "Elite men interpreted control over emotions such as . . . sadness . . . as the triumph of reason over passion."[31] George Washington tried—with considerable but not total success—to live up to those ideals.[32]

Washington's views on the proper way to face death and loss were remarkably consistent throughout his adult life and encompassed several aspects. At the center of his thought was the concept of God or Providence. (Washington used a remarkable number of names for this force, such as "the supreme disposer of all events," the "Grand Architect," "the Almighty ruler of the universe," the "great governor of the Universe," and dozens of others.) Washington understood this supernatural force as the giver of life and as actively intervening in human affairs. The first president has often been described as a deist, but if he was, he best fits into the category of what Edwin S. Gaustad has called a "warm deist."[33] Deism in the eighteenth

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ed., *Writings of Washington*, 23:340; for John Augustine Washington, see George Washington to Bushrod Washington, 10 Jan. 1787, in W. W. Abbot et al., eds., *The Papers of George Washington: Confederation Series* (6 vols.; Charlottesville and London, 1992–97), 4:509–10; for Charles Washington, see George Washington to Burgess Ball, 22 Sept. 1799, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 37:372; for Betty Washington Lewis, see George Washington to George Lewis, 9 Apr. 1797, in W. W. Abbot et al., eds., *The Papers of George Washington: Retirement Series* (2 vols. to date; Charlottesville and London, 1998–), 1:90; for George Augustine Washington, see George Washington to George Augustine Washington, 27 Jan. 1793, George Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington (later Lear), 24 Feb. 1793, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 32:315, 354; for Fanny Bassett Washington Lear, see George Washington to Tobias Lear, 30 Mar. 1796, George Washington to Burwell Bassett, Jr., 24 Apr. 1796, in ibid., 35:5–6, 26–27; for Burwell Bassett and his daughter, see George Washington to Burwell Bassett, 20 Apr. 1773, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Colonial Series*, 9:219, George Washington to Henry Lee, 20 Jan. 1793, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 32:310; for Nathanael Greene, see George Washington to Henry Lee, 26 July 1786, George Washington to the marquis de Lafayette, 25 Mar. 1787, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Confederation Series*, 4:171, 5:107; for Tench Tilghman, see George Washington to James Tilghman, 5 June 1786, in ibid., 4:96; for Patrick Henry, see George Washington to Archibald Blair, 24 June 1799, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 37:244; for Henry Lee's wife and daughter, see George Washington to Henry Lee, 27 Aug. 1790, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Presidential Series*, 6:347; for Benjamin Lincoln's son, see George Washington to Benjamin Lincoln, 11 Feb. 1788, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 29:412–13; for Henry Knox's son, see George Washington to Henry Knox, 8 Sept. 1791, in ibid., 31:360; for William Pearce's daughter, see George Washington to William Pearce, 13 July 1794, in ibid., 33:429; for Archibald Cary's wife, see George Washington to Archibald Cary, 15 June 1782, in ibid., 24:346.

[31] Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1980), p. 265; Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill and London, 1996), p. 324.

[32] Jan Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia* (Cambridge, London, and New York, 1983) devotes a chapter to contrasting mourning styles and attitudes toward death in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Virginia (pp. 69–105). The differences might not be as pronounced as indicated. Thomas Jefferson's extremely emotional reaction to his wife's death may not have been that unusual.

[33] Edwin S. Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson*, Library

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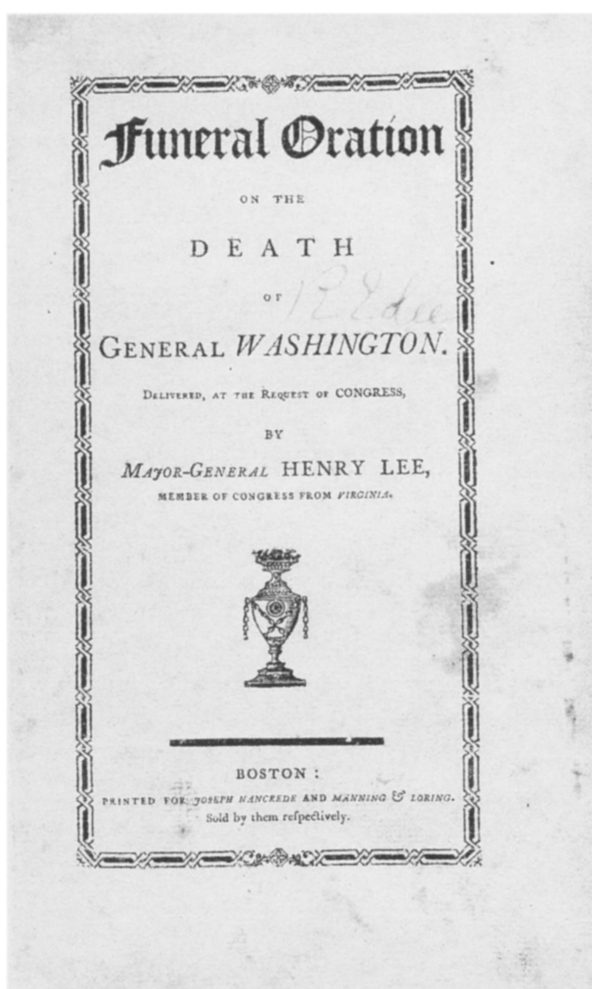

Funeral Oration
ON THE
DEATH
OF
GENERAL *WASHINGTON.*
DELIVERED, AT THE REQUEST OF CONGRESS,
BY
MAJOR-GENERAL HENRY LEE,
MEMBER OF CONGRESS FROM *VIRGINIA.*
BOSTON:
PRINTED FOR *JOSEPH NANCREDE* AND *MANNING & LORING.*
Sold by them refpectively.

"Light-Horse Harry" Lee, a veteran of the Continental Army and recently elected to the House of Representatives from Westmoreland County, was selected to deliver the congressional eulogy of Washington. This early edition bears the ownership signature of R. E. Lee.

Virginia Historical Society

century denied the interference of the Creator with the laws of the universe, but the image of the great "watchmaker" who created the world but does not intervene in it does not comport with Washington's ideas. By contrast, a "warm deist" sees Providence regularly shaping and molding history. In writing to people in times of personal bereavement, Washington consistently stressed three aspects of this supernatural force: It is wise, it is inscrutable, and it is irresistible.[34] Washington often emphasized the inscrutable nature of Providence. Its actions could not be understood from man's perspective. Man "can only form conjectures agreable to the small

of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids, Mich., and Cambridge, 1996), p. 143. For the variety of terms Washington used for this supernatural force, see the sources cited in note 30.

[34] George Washington to Henry Knox, 8 Sept. 1791, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 31:360.

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extent of our knowledge—and ignorant of the comprehensive Schemes intended." It was best to trust Providence "without perplexing ourselves to seek for that, which is beyond human ken."[35]

Washington recognized that it is often impossible for man to understand why tragedy occurs. He described death with emotive words such as a "stroke," "a severe stroke," a "blow," a "test," a "trial," "an afflictive trial," a "debt" we must all pay.[36] And although we may not understand why it occurs, we cannot prevent it from happening. As a young man Washington wrote to Sally Cary Fairfax, "[T]here is a Destiny, which has the Sovereign controul of our Actions—not to be resisted by the strongest efforts of Human Nature."[37] He never changed his mind.

Ultimately, Washington fell back on the position that "He that gave has a right to take away." Writing to his dying nephew, George Augustine Washington, he declared, "The will of Heaven is not to be controverted or scrutinized by the children of this world. It therefore becomes the Creatures of it to submit with patience and resignation to the will of the Creator whether it be to prolong, or to shorten the number of our days. To bless them with health, or afflict them with pain."[38] Over and over again, Washington urged those in grief to seek the "comforts of religion and philosophy" but primarily to submit with resignation.[39] He reported to Bryan Fairfax almost with pride how he responded to his nephew's death:

[35] George Washington to John Robinson, 1 Sept. 1758, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Colonial Series*, 5:432; George Washington to David Humphreys, 23 Mar. 1793, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 32:398.

[36] George Washington to William Augustine Washington, 27 Feb. 1798, in ibid., 36:171; George Washington to Bartholomew Dandridge, 25 Jan. 1799, in ibid., 37:109; George Washington to Nathanael Greene, 15 Dec. 1781, in ibid., 23:392.

[37] George Washington to Sarah Cary Fairfax, 12 Sept. 1758, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Colonial Series*, 6:11. Although Washington was only twenty-six at the time of the letter, he said he had "long entertained" this view of Providence.

[38] George Washington to Archibald Cary, 15 June 1782, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 24:346 (first quotation); George Washington to George Augustine Washington, 27 Jan. 1793, in ibid., 32:315–16 (second quotation).

[39] This advice appears at least a dozen times in his writings cited in note 30. It is a constant refrain in Washington's correspondence, and it was something that he practiced as well as preached. Twice, as president, he was gravely ill, once in 1789 and again in 1790. In the first instance, Washington told his physician, Dr. Samuel Bard, "Do not flatter me with vain hopes; I am not afraid to die, and therefore can bear the worst!" Bard's answer admitted the danger, and the president replied, "Whether to-night or twenty years hence, makes no difference" (quoted in Ford, *True Washington*, p. 53). During his even closer brush with death in 1790, his aide and later biographer, David Humphreys, wrote that Washington spoke directly to him and said, "I know it is very doubtful whether ever I shall rise from this bed, & God knows it is perfectly indifferent to me whether I do or not" (Zagarri, ed., *Humphreys' "Life of General Washington,"* p. 57). Martha Washington commented on the anxiety caused by her husband's illness and noted, "He seemed less concerned himself as to the event, than perhaps any other person in the United States" (Martha Dandridge Custis Washington to Mercy Otis Warren, 12 June 1790, quoted in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Presidential Series*, 5:397).

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"It is a loss I sincerely regret, but as it is the will of Heaven, whose decrees are always just and wise, I submit to it without a murmur."[40]

Yet even as Washington set this up as the ideal response, he realized the impossibility of achieving it in cases of great loss. Instead, he qualified his call for resignation and acceptance with the proviso, "as far as feelings of humanity will allow." Whatever the ideal, he was acutely aware that human beings must grieve for their loved ones. "It is the nature of humanity to mourn for the loss of our friends," he wrote, "and the more we loved them, the more poignant is our grief."[41] Consoling his good friend, Henry Knox, on the loss of his son, Washington recognized that "parental feelings are too much alive in the moment of these misfortunes to admit the consolations of religion or philosophy." He expressed similar sentiments to his nephew, George Lewis: "[T]ime alone can ameliorate, & soften the pangs we experience at parting."[42]

George Washington certainly grieved intensely for the loss of people close to him, although he did so privately. Adopting the view that controlling sadness was a sign of the triumph of reason over passion and that it was generally unmanly to weep, Washington shunned public displays of grief. Reflecting the mores of the time, Jacky Custis apologized to his stepfather for acting "Like a woman" upon hearing of his sister's death and giving himself "up entirely to melancholy for several Days."[43] When Custis himself died eight years later following the American victory at Yorktown, an associate noted that Washington was "uncommonly affected," and he stopped his diary in mid-sentence.[44] Washington so regretted Nathanael Greene's death that he could "scarce persuade myself to touch upon it."[45]

The absence of specific references to grieving for his father or half brother, Lawrence, does not mean Washington did not do so. On other

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[40] George Washington to Bryan Fairfax, 6 Mar. 1793, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 32:376.

[41] George Washington to Henry Lee, 27 Aug. 1790, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Presidential Series*, 6:347 (first quotation); George Washington to Tobias Lear, 30 Mar. 1796, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 35:5 (second quotation). Seneca himself recognized this need to grieve and counseled, "To lament the death of a friend is both natural and just; a sigh or a tear I would allow to his memory: but no profuse or obstinate sorrow. . . . I would not advise insensibility and hardness; it were inhumanity, and not virtue, not to be moved at the separation of familiar friends and relations: now, in such cases, we cannot command ourselves, we cannot forbear weeping, and we ought not to forbear" (L'Estrange, ed., *Seneca's Morals*, p. 212).

[42] George Washington to Henry Knox, 8 Sept. 1791, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 31:360; George Washington to George Lewis, 9 Apr. 1797, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Retirement Series*, 1:90.

[43] John Parke Custis to George Washington, 5 July 1773, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Colonial Series*, 9:265.

[44] John Ferling, *The First of Men: A Life of George Washington* (Knoxville, 1988), p. 306. Ferling speculates he broke off his journal entry as "if in his pain and despair he might record unmanly thoughts." There is, unfortunately, no way of knowing.

[45] George Washington to the marquis de Lafayette, 25 Mar. 1787, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Confederation Series*, 5:107.

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occasions, Washington noted that "[d]eath of near relations always produces awful and affecting emotions." "The death of a Parent is . . . Awful, and affecting." "Separation from our nearest relatives is a heart rending circumstance."[46] Several extant letters further help us understand why we have so few examples of an openly grieving Washington. Writing to Bushrod Washington, son of his favorite brother, John Augustine, who had just died, Washington declared, "[T]o attempt an expression of my sorrow on this occasion would be as feebly described, as it would be unavailing when related." Later, in a letter to Fanny Bassett Washington on the death of her husband (his nephew), Washington asserted, "To express this sorrow with the force I feel it, would answer no other purpose than to revive, in your breast, that poignancy of anguish, which, by this time, I hope is abated." Time and time again, Washington wrote that he felt "most sensibly" the loss of a loved one or friend that death had "snatched from us."[47]

Did Washington expect to be reunited with those who were snatched from him by death? Although the evidence is admittedly fragmentary and inconsistent, a careful reading of what Washington said—and did not say—indicates that he was skeptical about a reunion with loved ones in another life.

The most striking aspect of Washington's view of life after death centers on what he did not say. Not once in all of his authentic, extant correspondence did he explicitly indicate his belief in the reunion of loved ones in Heaven. Certainly the greatest comfort of religion in general and of Christianity in particular is this hope. Washington may have urged those in grief to find consolation in religion, but in all the letters of condolence he wrote, he never gave his recipients the comfort of his assurance that he believed they would meet again with their loved ones. In contrast, William Fairfax, following the death of his wife and Lawrence Washington's baby in 1747, wrote to Lawrence, "As it has been the Will of God lately to take to his mercy the spirits of my late Wife and your child we submit to his Divine Pleasure." When George Mason's daughter lost a child in 1785, Mason attempted to console her with the words, "Your dear baby has died innocent and blameless, and has been called away by an all wise and

[46] George Washington to Burgess Ball, 22 Sept. 1799, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 37:372; George Washington to Betty Washington Lewis, 13 Sept. 1789, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Presidential Series*, 4:32; George Washington to George Lewis, 9 Apr. 1797, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Retirement Series*, 1:90. Between his father's business ventures in various parts of Virginia and his trips to England, Washington had relatively little contact with him and, according to George Washington Parke Custis, only remembered that his father was a large man with a fair complexion. The author thanks one of the outside readers for this observation.

[47] George Washington to Bushrod Washington, 10 Jan. 1787, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Confederation Series*, 4:509–10 (first quotation); George Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington (later Lear), 24 Feb. 1793, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 32:354 (second quotation); George Washington to Henry Lee, 20 Jan. 1793, in ibid., 32:309 (third and fourth quotations).

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merciful Creator, most probably from a life of misery and misfortune, and most certainly to one of happiness and bliss."[48] Thomas Jefferson comforted John Adams following the death of his beloved Abigail with the thought that Adams should look forward to that "ecstatic meeting with friends we have loved and lost and whom we shall still love and never lose again."[49] Patrick Henry encouraged his sister with the hope that "we [shall] meet in that heaven to which the merits of Jesus will carry those who love and serve him."[50] Washington did not use such language. As Paul F. Boller, Jr., has written in another context, there is a "rugged honesty" in Washington's refusal to assume religious postures that he did not feel privately.[51]

Neither did Washington comfort himself with such a vision. Indeed, to the degree that he wrote about death, the emphasis was on separation. After his brother Jack's death, he lamented that he had "just bid an eternal farewell to a much loved Brother who was the intimate companion of my youth and the most affectionate friend of my ripened age." Shortly before his mother died, Washington visited her in Fredericksburg. "I took a final leave of my Mother, never expecting to see her more," he confided to his sister. Parting from his beloved friend, the marquis de Lafayette, following the end of the war, Washington pined, "I often asked myself, as our Carriages distended, whether that was the last sight, I ever should have of you? And tho' I wished to say no—my fears answered yes."[52] These assertions were not moderated with such words as "in this world" or the like.

Although no one can know what Washington was thinking on this subject on 14 December, the complete lack of religious context is striking. In Washington's final hours, as faithfully recounted by Lear, there is no reference to any religious words or prayers, no request for forgiveness, no fear of divine judgment, no call for a minister (although ample time existed

[48] William Fairfax to Lawrence Washington, 2 Oct. 1747, in Moncure Daniel Conway, *Barons of the Potomack and the Rappahannock* (New York, 1892), p. 256; George Mason to Sarah Mason McCarty, 10 Feb. 1785, in Robert A. Rutland, ed., *The Papers of George Mason, 1725–1792* (3 vols.; Chapel Hill, 1970), 2:810. Mason spoke also of his wife's dying confident of "eternal Happiness" (Mason family Bible, in ibid., 1:481).

[49] Quoted in Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, p. 142.

[50] Patrick Henry to Anne Henry Christian, 15 May 1786, in Henry, *Patrick Henry*, 2:287. Mechal Sobel devoted a chapter to the question of attitudes toward death and afterlife in Virginia (Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* [Princeton, 1987], pp. 214–25). She credited African influence for the growing belief in reunion of loved ones in Heaven. "By the late eighteenth century," she wrote, "heaven was being written of widely by whites. The dying spoke to their kin of the afterlife as a perfect world where 'we shall ere long be reunited never again to be separated from those we love.' 'We'll meet in heaven' became the acceptable parting for loved ones" (ibid., p. 223). This question needs additional research to get a better and more accurate sense of how Virginians felt in the late eighteenth century.

[51] Boller, *Washington & Religion*, p. 114.

[52] George Washington to Henry Knox, 27 Apr. 1787, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Confederation Series*, 5:157; George Washington to Betty Washington Lewis, 13 Sept. 1789, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Presidential Series*, 4:32; George Washington to the marquis de Lafayette, 8 Dec. 1784, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Confederation Series*, 2:175.

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Bayly Art Museum, University of Virginia, Charlottesville

Classical and religious elements blended in depictions of the apotheosis of Washington, such as this lithograph by H. Weishaupt (ca. 1830). The mythologizing of Washington also included embroidering his final scene to make his death an evangelical Christian one.

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to summon one if desired), no deathbed farewell, no promise or hope of meeting again in Heaven.[53] It is significant that Tobias Lear ended his personal account with the explicit hope that he would meet Washington in Heaven, but his sense of fidelity to a true record kept him from putting such words in Washington's mouth. (Of course, others were not so scrupulous, and accounts quickly emerged of Washington's having died a "Christian" death.)[54] Martha Washington, a devout Episcopalian, indicated soon afterward that she hoped to meet her husband in Heaven. Perhaps Washington did not take special leave of his wife because, as Thomas Law wrote, "he had frequently disapproved of the afflicting farewells which aggravated sorrows on those melancholy occasions," but words of hope of a future reunion—if honestly voiced—would surely have given comfort to those left behind.[55]

The argument that George and Martha Washington viewed the concept of an afterlife differently is further supported by examining the letters written to each by Jacky Custis on learning of the sudden death of his sister, Patsy, from seizures in 1773. In his letter to his mother, Jacky urged her to "remember you are a Christian." Patsy's "case is more to be envied than pitied, for if we mortals can distinguish between those who are deserveing of grace & who are not, I am confident she enjoys that Bliss prepar'd only for the good & virtuous, let these considerations, My dear Mother have their due weight with you and comfort yourself with reflecting that she now enjoys in substance what we in this world enjoy in imagination & that there is no real Happiness on this side of the grave." His letter to his stepfather was completely void of such sentiments, as if they would not have given solace to Washington.[56]

[53] According to the Reverend James Muir, minister of the Presbyterian church in Alexandria, Washington's last words included the statement, "I die hard . . . will this Struggle last long?—I hope I have nothing to fear" (quoted in Thompson, "George Washington and Religion"). Although clearly this quotation implies concern about being judged, preference certainly must be given to Lear's account, because he was there and Muir's account is secondhand at best. The query of the Reverend Samuel Miller of New York is pertinent: "How was it possible, he asked, for a true Christian, in the full exercise of his mental faculties, to die without one expression of distinctive belief, or Christian hope?" (Boller, *Washington & Religion*, p. 89).

[54] Tobias Lear, "journal" account (copy), ViMtvL. The efforts to make Washington more of a Christian than the facts warrant began early and continue to this day. Among the early biographies, the classic example is Parson Weems's, which had Washington send everyone out of the room so that he could commune alone with God and then die with the final words, *"Father of mercies! take me to thyself"* (Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of Washington*, ed. Peter S. Onuf, American History Through Literature [Armonk, N.Y., and London, 1996], pp. 134–35). Other early examples occur in David Ramsay, *The Life of George Washington, Commander in Chief of the Armies of the United States . . .* (New York, 1807), p. 319; John Marshall, *The Life of George Washington . . .* (5 vols., 1804–7; New York, 1969), 5:375; Jared Sparks, *Life of Washington* (Boston, 1839), p. 525; and John Frederick Schroeder, *Life and Times of Washington . . .* (2 vols., 1857–61; Albany, N.Y., 1903), 2:685.

[55] Martha Dandridge Custis Washington to Jonathan Trumbull, 15 Jan. 1800, in Fields, ed., *"Worthy Partner,"* p. 339; Thomas Law to Edward Law, first baron Ellenborough, 15 Dec. 1799, Papers of George Washington project, ViU.

[56] John Parke Custis to Martha Dandridge Custis Washington, 5 July 1773, in Fields, ed., *"Worthy*

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In April 1831, all the remains in the old family vault, including those of George and Martha Washington, were transferred to a new tomb. Visitors from all over the world, including Charles Crawford and five members of the Davidson family, continued to make pilgrimages to the site.

Although Washington's view of the afterlife does not seem to be Christian, the record is clear that he did believe in some type of life after death, although it may be tempting to read more into his offhand comments than might be merited. For example, Washington at least twice made reference to going to "the World of Spirits." He wrote Lafayette about searching for Elysium, the happy otherworld for heroes favored by the gods. When Patsy Custis died of epilepsy, he believed she had gone "into a more happy, & peaceful abode." Following his mother's death, he reflected the hope that she was in a "happier place."[57] Washington hoped

Partner," pp. 152–53; John Parke Custis to George Washington, 5 July 1773, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Colonial Series*, 9:265.

[57] George Washington to Robert Morris, 5 May 1787, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 29:211; George Washington to Henry Knox, 10 Jan. 1788, in ibid., 29:378; George Washington to Henry Knox, 25 Feb. 1787, in ibid., 29:170; George Washington to the marquis de Lafayette, 25 Mar. 1787, in ibid., 29:184; George Washington to Burwell Bassett, 20 June 1773, in Abbot et al., eds.,

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that God would bless a group of ministers "here and hereafter." He referred to nurturing the plants of friendship "before they are transplanted to a happier clime." In a draft written by Timothy Pickering to two Philadelphia churches, Washington looked forward to retirement, "which can only be exceeded by the hope of future happiness." While he was dying, he declared several times, "I am going. . . . I die hard but am not afraid to go." According to Lear's letter to his mother on 16 December, Washington told his secretary, "I am just going to change my scene."[58] The image of "going" implies some kind of continuation of existence. It is apparent that Washington had difficulty accepting or conceiving of the idea of nothingness. He did not believe that a person simply ceases to exist upon his or her death.

Although life goes on—in some fashion—the picture Washington painted of it was generally a gloomy one. "The World of Spirits" may or may not be a happy place. When Washington wrote of Patsy Custis going to a happier place, he specifically contrasted it with "the afflicted Path she hitherto has trod." A relative had written Washington that his mother was in fact in a happier place. Significantly, Washington added his hope that this was true rather than simply agreeing with the statement.[59] The passing reference to Elysium may well have been made tongue in cheek. Although there are clear references to an afterlife, and some of them are quite positive, Washington's references to death and what follows were more often gloomy and pessimistic.

Death was "the grim King" whom Washington, not yet thirty and very near his "last gasp," feared would master his "utmost efforts" and cause him to "sink in spite of a noble struggle."[60] Much later, to demonstrate how much he did not want to take on yet another new responsibility, Washington told Alexander Hamilton that he would leave his peaceful abode (Mount Vernon) with as much reluctance as he would go to the tomb of his ancestors.[61] When people died, he spoke of them as "poor Greene" or

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Washington Papers: Colonial Series, 9:243; George Washington to Betty Washington Lewis, 13 Sept. 1789, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Presidential Series*, 4:32.

[58] George Washington to clergy of the Protestant Episcopal church, 19 Aug. 1789, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Presidential Series*, 3:497; George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull, Jr., 5 Jan. 1784, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 27:294; George Washington to the rector et al. of the United Episcopal Churches of Christ Church and St. Peter's, Philadelphia, [2 Mar. 1797], in ibid., 35:411; Tobias Lear to Mary Stillson Lear, 16 Dec. 1799, copy in information file on Washington's death, ViMtvL.

[59] George Washington to Burwell Bassett, 20 June 1773, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Colonial Series*, 9:243 (quotation); Burgess Ball to George Washington, 25 Aug. 1789, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Presidential Series*, 3:536; George Washington to Betty Washington Lewis, 13 Sept. 1789, in ibid., 4:32.

[60] George Washington to Richard Washington, 20 Oct. 1761, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Colonial Series*, 7:80.

[61] George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, 27 May 1798, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Retirement Series*, 2:298.

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"poor Laurens" or "poor Colo. Harrison" or "poor Mr. Custis." Referring to death, Washington wrote about his "approaching decay," the "hour of my dissolution," of going "to the shades of darkness," "to sleep with my Fathers," to "the shades below," "to the tomb of my ancestors," "to the dreary mansions of my Fathers." Death was "that country from whence no Traveller returns."[62] The overall image is not a bright one, certainly not a Christian one.

The Christian images of judgment, redemption through the sacrifice of Christ, and eternal life for the faithful find no resonance in any of Washington's surviving writings. Indeed, in his personal correspondence he never referred to Jesus or the Christ or the Savior at all. In a revealing letter to Lafayette, to whom he wrote with a frankness shared with few if any other correspondents, Washington described Christianity as if he were an outsider. "Being no bigot myself to any mode of worship," he confided, "I am disposed to indulge professors of Christianity ... that road to Heaven, which to them shall seem the most direct plainest easiest and least liable to exception." Douglas Southall Freeman concluded that at age twenty-seven, Washington found "no rock of refuge in religion."[63] Forty years later, he still had not found it.

Washington appeared to be more interested in acquiring a different type of immortality, a secular immortality achieved by attaining fame across the ages.[64] In another letter to Lafayette, Washington mentioned the "Bards," those poets "who hold the keys of the gate by which Patriots, Sages and Heroes are admitted to immortality." He considered the "Antient Bards" "both the preist and door-keepers to the temple of fame." David Humphreys understood Washington's desires. In connection with Jean-Antoine Houdon's visit to Mount Vernon to take likenesses for a statue of Washington, Humphreys observed, "[I]ndeed, my dear General, it must be a pleasing reflection to you amid the tranquil walks of private life to find that history, poetry, painting, & sculpture will vye with each other in consigning your name to immortality."[65] One can sense Washington strongly shared the sentiments his aide expressed when the general wrote to

[62] George Washington to George Augustine Washington, 25 Oct. 1786, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 29:28; George Washington to the marquis de Lafayette, 1 Feb. 1784, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Confederation Series*, 1:88; George Washington to the marquis de Lafayette, 8 Dec. 1784, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 28:6–7; George Washington to Adrienne, marquise de Lafayette, 4 Apr. 1784, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Confederation Series*, 1:258; George Washington to James Craik, 8 Sept. 1789, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Presidential Series*, 4:1; George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, 17 Dec. 1797, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 36:108.

[63] George Washington to the marquis de Lafayette, 15 Aug. 1787, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 29:259; Freeman et al., *Washington*, 2:387–88, 397.

[64] Douglass Adair, *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays*, ed. Trevor Colbourn (New York, 1974).

[65] George Washington to the marquis de Lafayette, 28 May 1788, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Confederation Series*, 6:297; David Humphreys to George Washington, 17 July 1785, in ibid., 3:131.

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James Tilghman following the death of his son, Tench: "[T]here is this consolation to be drawn, that while living, no man could be more esteemed—and since dead, none more lamented than Colo. Tilghman."[66]

To be revered in life, to be lamented in death, to be remembered with honor in history were concrete things that could give real consolation in a time of grief. Writing to Sally Cary Fairfax at age twenty-six, Washington mused about the fall of a British officer and declared, "[W]ho is there that does not rather Envy, than regret a Death that gives birth to Honour & Glorious memory."[67] This glorious memory was something to envy and desire and strive to achieve.

For Washington, exactly what happens after death is beyond man's ability either to know or to control. In the face of this fact, what can man do beyond trusting in the goodness of Providence? A hint of Washington's view can be found in one of his favorite passages from his favorite play, Joseph Addison's *Cato*: "It is beyond the power of mortals to command success. We'll do more, Sempronius. We will deserve it."[68] On the death of a beloved niece, Washington rather paradoxically wrote, "She is now no more! But she must be happy, because her virtue has a claim to it."[69]

Not only personal courage allowed Washington to face his final struggle with the Grim King with perfect resignation and equanimity. Also fortifying him was the conviction that he had lived his life with honor and that he had "always walked on a straight line, and endeavoured as far as human frailties, and perhaps strong passions, would enable him, to discharge the relative duties to his Maker and fellow-men, without seeking any indirect or left-handed attempts to acquire popularity."[70] Thus armed with virtue, he ventured out prepared and unafraid to meet whatever the future might hold.

Whatever future tests might or might not lie ahead, George Washington met his final test on earth—as he had lived his life—with the type of grace and courage and character that affirms the dignity of man and commands respect and admiration. If ever a man deserved the secular immortality he so avidly sought, that man was George Washington.

[66] George Washington to James Tilghman, 5 June 1786, in ibid., 4:96.

[67] George Washington to Sarah Cary Fairfax, 25 Sept. 1758, in Abbot et al., eds., *Washington Papers: Colonial Series*, 6:42. This reflection is often cited as if Washington made it after hearing of the death of General James Wolfe at Quebec, but that event did not occur until 1759. Charles Royster has demonstrated that many patriots felt the same way. In the words of one Massachusetts orator, "Who, that hath worth and merit, would not quit a present uncertain life to live eternally in the memory of present and future ages?" (Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775–1783* [Chapel Hill, 1979], p. 32).

[68] Quoted in Morison, "Young Man Washington," p. 47.

[69] George Washington to Tobias Lear, 30 Mar. 1796, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, 35:6.

[70] George Washington to Bryan Fairfax, 20 Jan. 1799, in ibid., 37:94–95.

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