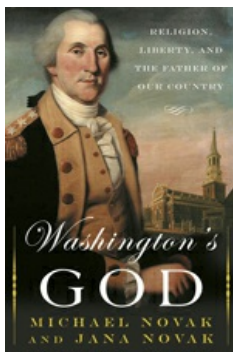


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George Washington's God — Something Interesting for Presidents Day

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With contested questions of church and state abounding in our times, the religious convictions of the Founding Fathers become the stuff of controversy. In this regard, one of the more enigmatic of the Founders was George Washington himself. Just what did our first president believe about God?

The prevailing secular wisdom of recent decades held that Washington was a Deist. While the 'Father of the Nation' did use rather Deistic-sounding phrases and expressions, Washington clearly believed in a God who ruled directly in the affairs of nations — something the god of the Deists would not (or could not) do.

Writing in today's edition of *USA Today*, Michael and Jana Novak, authors of *Washington's God*, argue that Washington had a very clear confidence in God's providence. As they explain, "From his days as a 22-year-old lieutenant thrust into leadership on the western frontier, through his experiences as the commander in chief of a rag-tag but determined army facing the strongest army and largest navy of his time, Washington learned invaluable lessons about the character of men and the nature of God. These experiences proved to him that an intervening force was at work in American history and in his life. That knowledge sustained him."

More:

In his private letters and public statements as commander in chief and president, Washington seldom missed an opportunity to give praise to Providence and to beg God to continue favoring this nation. In his farewell address, Washington considered his legacy to our young nation and wrote these words:

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them."

Washington's religious behavior, especially as a public official, might displease those today who argue against religion in the public square. Yet it was his trust in Providence that allowed him to be the man that he was, and to achieve what he did. Washington's God, who is active in human affairs, was there at the darkest days of our founding.

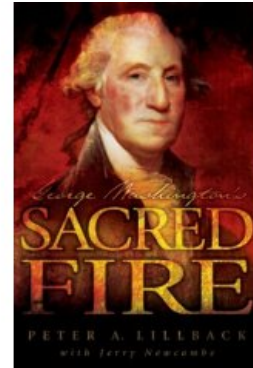
As we celebrate the birthday of a great man who made his nation great, a nation that is again facing a great test of patience and determination, we can take strength from Washington's certainty that God always favors liberty.

We are wise to avoid the rush to remake George Washington in our own image, whether ardent secularist or fervent evangelical Christian. Washington, like all of us, was a man of his times. His expressions of Christian belief must be placed within the context of his Anglican experience in Virginia — a tradition not given to flowery expressions of personal belief.

This much is clear: Washington was no secularist, nor was he what we would now describe as an Evangelical believer. Most likely, he was a traditional Anglican believer whose trust in divine providence shaped every moment of his illustrious life. What George Washington believed about the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not fully clear. That Washington believed in a God who ruled over the nations and intervened in human affairs *is* clear — and Washington was confident that God favored the cause of justice and liberty.

FOR FURTHER READING: Peter A. Lillback, President of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, argues that we should understand Washington as a devout Christian who embedded references to his personal faith in his many writings and public statements. In his article, "[Why Have Scholars Downplayed George Washington's Faith?](#)," Lillback argues:

Within this vast collection of Washington's own words and writings, we now have a remarkable ability to uncover what earlier scholars were unable to access. And when we let Washington's own words and deeds speak for his faith we get quite a different perspective than that of most recent modern historians. Washington referred to himself frequently using the words "ardent," "fervent," "pious," and "devout." There are over one hundred different prayers composed and written by Washington in his own hand, with his own words, in his writings. He described himself as one of the deepest men of faith of his day when he confessed to a clergyman, "No Man has a more perfect Reliance on the alwise, and powerful dispensations of the Supreme Being than I have nor thinks his aid more necessary."



Rather than avoid the word "God," on the very first national Thanksgiving under the U.S. Constitution, he said, "It is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor." Although he never once used the word "Deist" in his voluminous writings, he often mentioned religion, Christianity, and the Gospel. He spoke of Christ as "the divine Author of our blessed religion." He encouraged missionaries who were seeking to "Christianize" the "aboriginals." He took an oath in a private letter, "on my honor and the faith of a Christian." He wrote of "the blessed religion revealed in the Word of God." He encouraged seekers to learn "the religion of Jesus Christ." He even said to his soldiers, "To the distinguished Character of Patriot, it should be our highest Glory to add the more distinguished Character of Christian." Not bad for a "lukewarm" Episcopalian!

Historians ought no longer be permitted to do the legerdemain of turning Washington into a Deist even if they found it necessary and acceptable to do so in the past. Simply put, it is time to let the words and writings of Washington's faith speak for themselves.

Lillback is also author of [George Washington's Sacred Fire](#).

