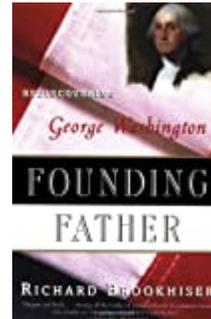




**Richard Brookhiser.** *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington.* New York: Free Press, 1997. 230 pp. \$14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-684-83142-8.



**Reviewed by** Pat Furlong (Indiana University South Bend)

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## George Washington Rediscovered

Why another book about George Washington? Brookhiser is a magazine editor and columnist, not a professor of history or political science. He writes for citizens for whom Washington exists “in our textbooks and our wallets, but not our hearts” (p. 4). The reserve Washington so carefully cultivated made him a remote figure even to eighteenth-century Americans. Brookhiser writes to overcome the barriers of time and personality, to explain why modern Americans should appreciate Washington’s greatness, stating that “His life still has the power to inspire anyone who studies it” (p. 13).

This brief work is not a conventional biography, and it makes no effort to tell the full story of Washington’s life. Brookhiser is sometimes careless with the fine points of historical accuracy, but in its major themes this is a fascinating book for mature readers, but probably not for college students. In his episodic account of Washington’s public life, Brookhiser concentrates on his careers as general, constitution-maker, and president. He describes a politician more thoughtful than many imagine, a “founding father” who had the remarkable good sense to retire twice at the right moment, from the army in 1783

and from the presidency in 1797. What other revolutionary hero ever published a farewell address? Washington, aristocratic in manner and patriarchal in many ways, trusted his fellow citizens to manage without his leadership. “Washington’s last service to his country,” Brookhiser says, “was to stop serving” (p. 101).

*Founding Father* is well-written but lightly documented. It is totally lacking in illustrations, a remarkable lapse in a work intended for a wide readership. Brookhiser occasionally indulges in inappropriate slang, as well as topical references which will quickly date the book. This is emphatically a study of Washington’s personality, character and image, often at the cost of clear explanations of military and government policy. The author’s understanding of Alexander Hamilton’s financial program scarcely exceeds that of a backcountry Virginia representative in the First Congress.

George Washington was a commanding figure, as so many who saw him remembered vividly. His height, his physical presence, his horsemanship, and his courage on the battlefield all attracted notice. Washington understood clearly that he was playing a role, and he often

used theatrical metaphors, both in correspondence and in public statements. He was overly conscious of his limited formal education, but he read the pamphlets of the revolutionary years with care and possessed a shrewd understanding of politics.

*Founding Father* pushes readers to think about the foundations of American self-government, its fragility and its remarkable success. For a generation, Washington played the leading role, acting as “the most important man in America, whether he was onstage or off, for twenty-four years” (p. 162). Then, unlike a patriot king or a patriarch, he understood that it was time for him to retire. “How difficult resignation must have been,” Brookhiser writes, “for a man who loved uniforms, activity, and office as much as he loved his vine and fig tree—for though he always came back to Mount Vernon, he always left it, when the call came” (p. 187). In retire-

ment Washington made another remarkable decision, effective only upon his death: he was the only one of the revolutionary founding fathers to free his slaves.

Richard Brookhiser lacks Garry Wills’s literary flair as well his eccentricity. His Washington is somehow more human, less monumental, a man rather than a marble statue. Brookhiser is not a scholar, but he is a skilled political journalist and he brings a sound knowledge of high politics to this “moral biography.” It is a main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club and the History Book Club, but readers of H-Pol should not let this dissuade them. Scholars too will benefit from reading *Founding Father*.

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