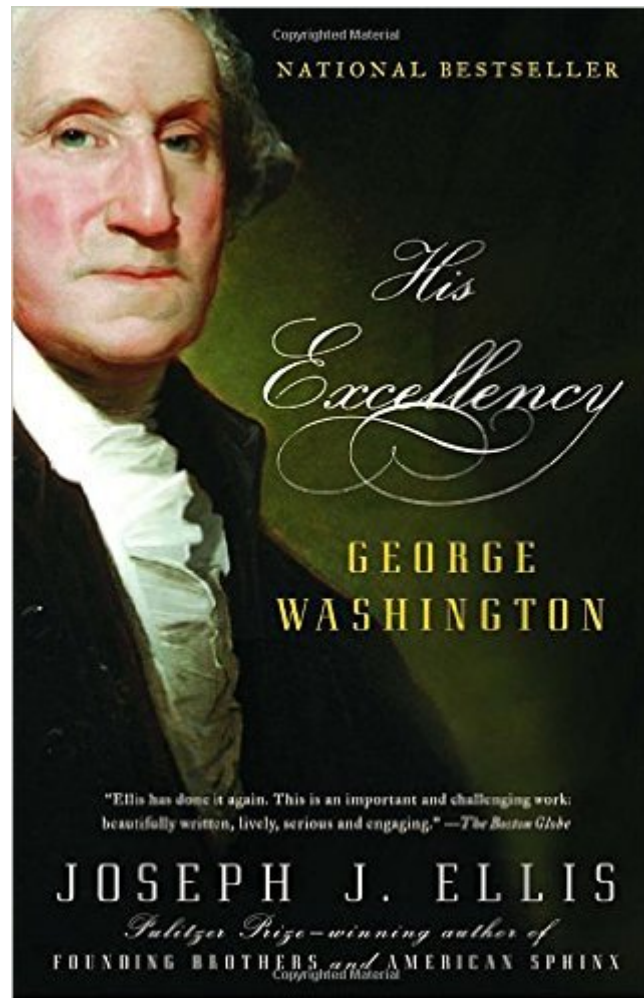


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His Excellency: George Washington



Synopsis

National Bestseller To this landmark biography of our first president, Joseph J. Ellis brings the exacting scholarship, shrewd analysis, and lyric prose that have made him one of the premier historians of the Revolutionary era. Training his lens on a figure who sometimes seems as remote as his effigy on Mount Rushmore, Ellis assesses George Washington as a military and political leader and a man whose "statue-like solidity" concealed volcanic energies and emotions. Here is the impetuous young officer whose miraculous survival in combat half-convinced him that he could not be killed. Here is the free-spending landowner whose debts to English merchants instilled him with a prickly resentment of imperial power. We see the general who lost more battles than he won and the reluctant president who tried to float above the partisan feuding of his cabinet. His Excellency is a magnificent work, indispensable to an understanding not only of its subject but also of the nation he brought into being.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

His Excellency George Washington attempts to free Washington from the frozen icon/monument status that has gathered around his name, and presents him to the reader as an approachable, flesh and blood portrait. Joseph Ellis accomplishes this goal admirably. Most notably, he manages to steer cleanly between Charybdis and Scylla, avoiding the twin errors of portraying his subject as a saint, or its opposite, which he describes in his prefaces as "the deadest, whitest male in American history." He accomplishes this in a modest 275 pages, which makes this book an ideal

introduction for someone beginning to study the life of Washington. The central thesis of this work is that Washington's amazing career was driven by an enlightened self-interest, tempered by a hard-earned practical wisdom. Always sticking closely to the available evidence, Ellis shows us a young Washington full of unbounded ambition for wealth and social status that he learned to control and temper, but never eliminate. Ellis writes that, "ambition this gargantuan were only glorious if harnessed to a cause larger than oneself, which they most assuredly were after 1775." He shows us Washington as a self-educated man, not from books like his illustrious contemporary Ben Franklin, but from practical, visceral experiences of his youth fighting the French and Indians in the backcountry of Pennsylvania. He views Washington's inglorious defeat at the Great Meadows and his miraculous survival of the carnage of Braddock's massacre as critical events that freed him of illusions, and left him a man who viewed the world through practical realities rather than shimmering ideals. This practical education, working on his natural ambition, created the control mechanisms that allowed Washington to serve his nation so long and so well.

In the preface to this ambitious and largely successful biography of George Washington, Joseph J. Ellis sets the tone by calling his subject "America's greatest secular saint" and "the Foundingest Father of them all." That puts the biographer's problem nicely. Washington is so universally revered as well as so distant from us in time that he is more marble than human flesh. The biographer's task is to somehow breathe life back into a monument. Ellis has a good track record at this sort of thing. Most recently he did the trick with Thomas Jefferson in *AMERICAN SPHINX*. His work on Washington is in somewhat the same vein, and is equally accomplished. Ellis's approach sails close to the dangerous shoals of psycho-biography but never quite runs aground on them. In trying to fathom Washington's true character and motives, he sticks fairly close to the written record without presuming to peer inside his subject's head. His conclusions are not always those that today's schoolchildren find in their history texts. In the narrow tactical sense, for instance, Ellis judges Washington no great military genius. He points out that Washington lost more battles than he won, he was a control freak and a man very conscious of his place in history. Despite this "posing for posterity," however, Ellis is favorably inclined toward his subject because he had a career "devoted to getting the big things right." That career, of course, had two separate parts: military commander and --- after four years in retirement --- our first President.

When it is seen that popular historian Joseph J. Ellis has written another book about a personality from the Revolutionary War era, excitement fills the publishing world. When it is seen, though, that

the subject of his book is George Washington, the question comes quickly to mind, "Do we need another book about George Washington?" After having read Ellis's book, the answer would seem to be a less ambiguous than you would think, "Well, no." There is no "new" information about Washington here and very little noteworthy insight. From the introduction, we learn that there have been many biographies of Washington. Some of them, like the tales of an early nineteenth century parson, were pretty fanciful (the "cherry tree incident", the dollar across the Potomac), while others were quite factual and scholarly. The only thing that could be said against this second group seems to have been that they were exceedingly long and, possibly, dry of read. Such cannot be said of Ellis's work. Ellis is an excellent and engaging writer who could write a book on the local city council's discussion of noise abatement and leave you hoping there's a second volume. He writes with warmth and humor and all those other buzzwords so frequently misapplied to writers and I can truly say I enjoyed reading the book. With so many other works on Washington already out there, it was left to Ellis to try to find some new angle with which to chronicle the Father of Our Country. With all the facts recorded (almost ad nauseum), what angle could he use? Ellis has chosen to explore the "character" of George Washington. It takes Ellis 274 pages (plus some end notes) to determine that Washington was aloof.

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