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Washington: A Life by Ron Chernow

The first President of the United States belongs to the circle of great personages whose deeds are very well known, but whose personality and private life remains, at best, cloudy. Washington preferred it that way, and his widow, Martha, did her best to honour his wishes by burning all their correspondence after his death.

Yet, as Chernow shows, Washington was very much the product of his upbringing and a creature of circumstance. He was born into a respectable but impoverished Virginian family in 1732 which fell further down social ladder after the death of Washington's father in 1743. Aged only eleven, Washington had his world turned upside and his education severely curtailed. But out of this misfortune came offers of help from the richer side of the family which afforded him greater opportunities than he might have otherwise enjoyed. Well-placed patronage enabled him to enter Virginian politics and the Army at a level of a gentleman of means. Since Washington was both ambitious and energetic he seized every opportunity to raise himself up.

The Seven Years War (1756-1763), a major European conflict that spread to the colonies in North America as the French and British battled for control over Canada, greatly enhanced Washington's reputation as a military commander. After the conflict ended, he was made Commander-in-Chief of Virginia's defences – a prominent post which guaranteed him an influential role when the Colonists began to seek independence in 1774.

Washington became Commander-in-Chief of the so-called Continental Army and remained its head for the entire Revolutionary War, only stepping down in 1783 after independence had been achieved. He has never been thought of as great military strategist. The Americans won more through a combination of dogged determination and British ineptitude rather than through brilliant fighting. But without Washington to keep the Army together through sheer force of will, the Revolutionary movement might have died out from fatigue.

It was once independence had been achieved that Washington became not just a great leader but the greatest American statesman of all time. He could have turned the Presidency, when it was offered to him, into some kind of quasi-monarchical office. Instead, Washington remained absolutely true to his democratic ideals. His vision of America became its future.

Chernow's great skill lies not in the retelling of Washington's achievements – which are extremely familiar to all Americans - but in his ability to draw out hidden threads and find the man inside the legend. It turns out, for example, that Washington was blessed and cursed in equal measure by his family

connections. He may have inherited his 'flinty self-reliance' from his mother, but that was all she gave him. The widow Washington was a selfish and brittle woman whose demands for money from her famous son became increasingly strident over the years. She had nothing but critical things to say of him and his wife, Martha, and the three never spent a night under the same roof together. Needless to say, Washington did not attend his mother's funeral.

He was also unlucky in his step-children. Unable to have their own, Martha's two from her previous marriage became the sole focus for both of them. Unfortunately, her daughter Patsy – the favourite of the family - was an epileptic whose health kept them on tenterhooks until she died aged seventeen. Jacky, her son, was a mendacious wastrel, who gave Washington much trouble and heartache until his untimely but convenient death at the age of twenty-seven. Jacky's legacy to his step-father were his debts, his four young children, and a tangential relationship to the Confederate General Robert E Lee, who married his granddaughter.

Jacky's orphaned grandchildren loved Washington deeply but were also frightened of him. All laughter usually died when he entered the room. His temper was legendary, nor was he interested in making people feel at ease. This made the public side of Washington's life – which was the majority of his day, every day - a burden for him and a distressing chore for those forced to converse with him at dinners or gatherings.

Washington's increasing emotional alienation as he aged may explain his ambivalent attitude towards his slaves. He did free them in his will, but Chernow reveals that Washington regarded the people toiling on his Mount Vernon plantation and in his household more as human chattels than as human beings. The dramatic flight of Ona Judge, Martha Washington's personal maid, to the free State of New Hampshire while Washington was President led to an extraordinary attempt to have the fugitive slave kidnapped and sent back to pro-slavery Virginia. Washington ordered his Treasury Secretary to 'seize and put her onboard a vessel bound immediately to this place'. But Ona proved to be a more indefatigable opponent than the British and she thwarted every attempt to bribe, browbeat or trick her back into slavery. Washington's favourite cook, Hercules, also chose freedom when the chance came his way, even though it meant abandoning his wife and children forever.

Washington possessed, as Chernow says, 'a normal quota of human frailty', but the beauty of this biography is in the perfect pitch between the light and the dark, the enigmatic and the familiar. This is truly 'A Life'.