

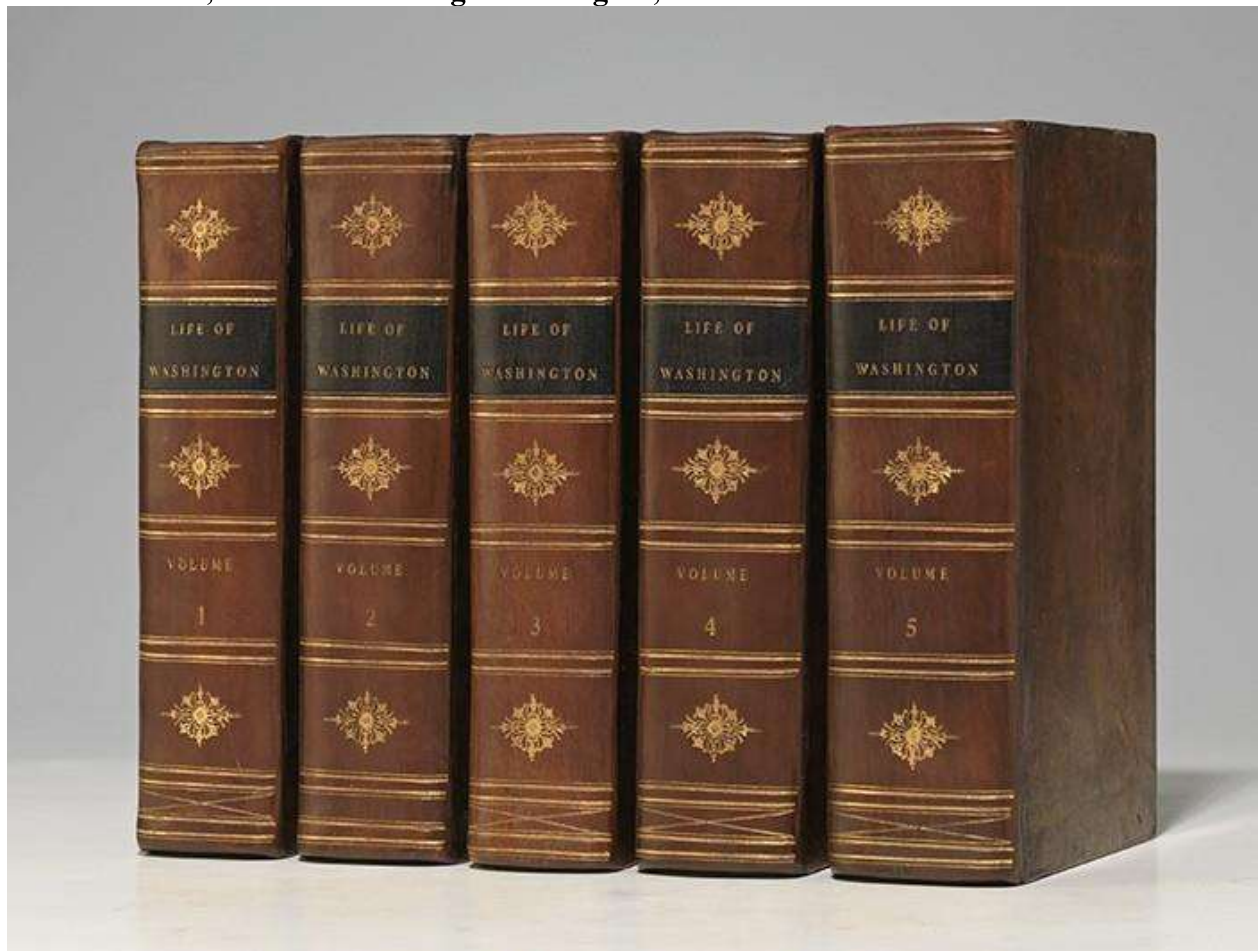
# "The Life of George Washington" (Volumes I-IV, 1804-1807), by John Marshall: A Canonical Book

Curated by Stephen A Batman

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## Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

John Marshall, The Life of George Washington, 1804-07



THE  
LIFE  
OF  
GEORGE WASHINGTON,  
COMMANDER IN CHIEF  
OF THE  
AMERICAN FORCES,  
DURING THE WAR WHICH ESTABLISHED THE INDEPENDENCE  
OF HIS COUNTRY,  
AND  
FIRST PRESIDENT  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES.

COMPILED  
UNDER THE INSPECTION OF  
THE HONOURABLE BUSHROD WASHINGTON,  
FROM  
*ORIGINAL PAPERS*  
BEQUEATHED TO HIM BY HIS DECEASED RELATIVE, AND NOW IN POSSESSION  
OF THE AUTHOR.

TO WHICH IS PREFIXED,  
AN INTRODUCTION,  
CONTAINING  
A COMPENDIOUS VIEW OF THE COLONIES PLANTED BY THE ENGLISH  
ON THE  
CONTINENT OF NORTH AMERICA,  
FROM THEIR SETTLEMENT  
TO THE COMMENCEMENT OF THAT WAR WHICH TERMINATED IN THEIR  
INDEPENDENCE.

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BY JOHN MARSHALL.

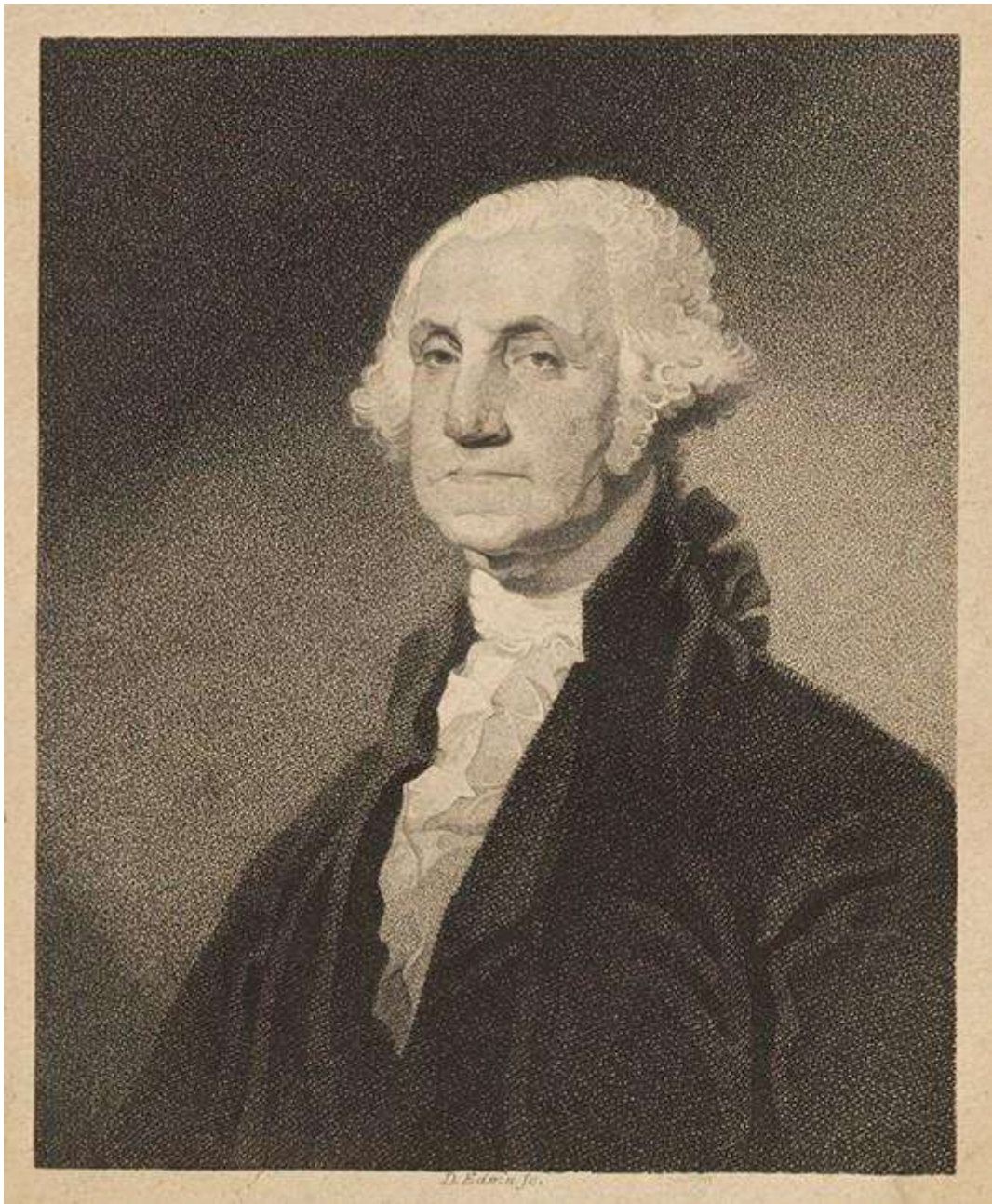
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VOL. I.

PHILADELPHIA:

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY C. P. WAYNE.

1804.







## **FIRST EDITION OF MARSHALL'S LIFE OF WASHINGTON WITH SCARCE ATLAS VOLUME OF THE MILITARY CAMPAIGNS**

First edition of Marshall's monumental life of Washington, complete with engraved frontispiece portrait and the companion Atlas of ten strategic maps (eight double-page) depicting Washington's major Revolutionary campaigns.

Shortly after Marshall became Chief Justice he was approached by Washington's nephew, Bushrod, to write the first President's official biography. Probably no man was better suited to the task. As a personal friend of Washington, Marshall had been the one to announce the President's death in 1799, had offered the eulogy, had chaired the committee that arranged the funeral rites, and had led the commission to plan a monument in the capital city.

When Marshall's Life of Washington appeared, it was considered so authoritative that Washington scholar Jared Sparks suggested any new biographical undertaking would be "presumptuous" (Sparks, Washington I:12). This first edition, together with the first English edition of the same years, are "the only complete editions of this indispensable work, the 'Colonial History' being omitted in the later American editions" (Sabin).

Gilbert Stuart's famous portrait of Washington, made known to the general public through this engraved frontispiece, was produced by Philadelphia stipple-engraver David Edwin-"for upwards of 30 years, the most prolific workman in America" (Fielding, 109). With very scarce quarto companion atlas of ten strategic maps and 22-page list of subscribers. Howes M317. Sabin 44788. Shaw & Shoemaker 6710, 12996. Lightly penciled owner inscription in Volume V.

(WASHINGTON, George) MARSHALL, John. The Life of George Washington. Philadelphia: C.P. Wayne, 1804-07. Six volumes. Thick octavo, contemporary full brown tree calf rebacked, black spine labels, marbled endpapers. Quarto atlas volume, original paper boards sympathetically rebacked, original printed orange label on front board, uncut.

Text volumes generally fresh with light scattered foxing and occasional marginal damp-staining, small expert repair to closed tear minimally affecting frontispiece; quarto Atlas with usual scattered foxing and offsetting (as always). Rarely found complete, in near-fine condition, handsomely bound.

## **Introduction**

"The Life of George Washington" stands as the first comprehensive biography of America's founding president, written by one of his contemporaries who would himself become a towering figure in American jurisprudence. Published between 1804 and 1807 in five volumes (with an accompanying atlas), this monumental work was undertaken by John Marshall shortly after Washington's death in 1799. Marshall's motivation for writing this biography stemmed from both personal admiration for Washington and a desire to preserve the legacy of the man who had been instrumental in establishing American independence and governance. As the newly appointed

Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Marshall was uniquely positioned to document Washington's life with authority and insight.

The cultural, economic, and political climate surrounding the publication was one of significant partisan division. The young republic was experiencing the growing pains of its democratic experiment, with fierce competition between Federalists (who favored a strong central government) and Democratic-Republicans (who advocated for greater states' rights and limited federal power). Marshall, a committed Federalist, wrote his biography during Thomas Jefferson's presidency, when Democratic-Republican principles were ascendant. The first two volumes, published in 1803, were poorly received by many who viewed them as an attack on the Democratic-Republican Party<sup>8</sup>. This political context inevitably colored Marshall's portrayal of Washington, emphasizing those aspects of Washington's character and career that reinforced Federalist principles of strong national government and executive authority.

Marshall's biography was not merely a chronicle of events but a deliberate effort to shape the national memory of Washington and, by extension, the founding principles of the American republic. It was the first authorized biography of Washington, with Marshall having been granted exclusive access to Washington's personal papers and archives by the Washington family<sup>810</sup>. This privileged access gave Marshall's work an authenticity and intimacy unmatched by other early biographers, making it an invaluable primary source for understanding both Washington and the founding era.

## The Author

John Marshall (1755-1835) was the fourth and arguably most influential Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, serving from 1801 until his death in 1835. His thirty-four-year tenure as Chief Justice remains the longest in Supreme Court history, during which he established the Court as a coequal branch of government alongside the executive and legislative branches<sup>3</sup>. Before his judicial career, Marshall was a leader of the Federalist Party in Virginia and served in the United States House of Representatives from 1799 to 1800, followed by a brief stint as Secretary of State under President John Adams from 1800 to 1801<sup>3</sup>.

Marshall's formative experiences included service in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, where he served alongside Washington. This firsthand experience of the war's hardships and the challenges of maintaining an army with inadequate support from the states profoundly shaped his political outlook, convincing him of the necessity for a strong central government. After the war, Marshall established himself as a prominent lawyer in Virginia before entering national politics.

Marshall's judicial philosophy emphasized national supremacy over state authority and an expansive reading of the Constitution's enumerated powers. His court decisions, particularly in cases like *Marbury v. Madison*, *McCulloch v. Maryland*, and *Gibbons v. Ogden*, established the

principle of judicial review and strengthened federal authority, laying the groundwork for American constitutional law as we know it today.

As a biographer, Marshall brought his legal mind and firsthand knowledge of the founding era to bear on Washington's life story. He meticulously researched his subject, reviewing Washington's papers, consulting with those who had served alongside Washington, and examining existing historical accounts<sup>2</sup>. His biography reflects both his admiration for Washington and his Federalist principles, presenting Washington as the indispensable man whose character and leadership were essential to the success of the American experiment.

## **Why this is a Canonical Book**

"The Life of George Washington" must be included in the canon of essential American works for several compelling reasons. First, it represents the earliest comprehensive account of Washington's life by a contemporary who knew him personally and had access to his papers. This gives Marshall's biography unparalleled authenticity and historical value as both a primary and secondary source on the founding era.

Second, Marshall's work is not merely a biography but "political history as well as biography... the only comprehensive account by a great statesman of the full founding of the United States—of the founding of an independent people as well as of its government"<sup>8</sup>. It provides a firsthand account of the challenges faced during the Revolutionary War and the early republic, offering insights into the fragility of the American experiment and the leadership required to sustain it.

Third, the biography reflects and articulates the Federalist vision of American governance that would profoundly shape the development of American political institutions. Marshall's portrayal of Washington emphasizes the importance of strong, virtuous leadership and a robust national government—principles that Marshall himself would later reinforce through his landmark Supreme Court decisions.

Fourth, the work serves as a case study in the relationship between democracy and human greatness, exploring "to what extent does democracy depend upon extraordinary leaders" and how "a leader and a democracy overcome the tensions inherent in such a relation"<sup>2</sup>. This theme remains relevant to ongoing debates about leadership, democratic governance, and the role of exceptional individuals in shaping history.

Finally, Marshall's biography helped establish the Washington mythology that would become central to American national identity. By portraying Washington as the embodiment of republican virtue and disinterested public service, Marshall contributed to the creation of a national hero whose example would inspire generations of Americans. The biography thus played a crucial role in shaping American civic culture and providing a model of leadership for the young republic.

## Five Timeless Quotes

1. "In his civil administration, as in his military career, ample and repeated proofs were exhibited of that practical good sense, that sound judgment, which is perhaps the most rare, and is certainly the most valuable quality of the human mind. Taught to distrust first impressions, he sought to acquire all the information which was attainable, and to hear, without prejudice, all the reasons which could be urged for or against a particular measure. His own judgment was suspended until it became necessary to determine; and his decisions, thus maturely made, were seldom if ever beshaken."[7](#)

This quote captures Washington's deliberative leadership style and sound judgment—qualities that remain essential for effective leadership in any era. In our current age of rapid decision-making and polarized politics, Washington's approach of gathering information, considering multiple perspectives, and making carefully reasoned decisions offers a valuable counterpoint to impulsive leadership. His ability to suspend judgment until necessary and then stand firmly by well-considered decisions exemplifies the balance between thoughtful deliberation and decisive action that effective leaders must strike.

2. "The season for action always arrived before the preparations for it were completed."[2](#)

This observation about the challenges Washington faced during the Revolutionary War speaks to the perennial challenge of leadership: the need to act despite incomplete preparation. In our fast-paced world, leaders in business, government, and other fields often face similar pressures, needing to make decisions with imperfect information and limited resources. Washington's ability to persevere and achieve success despite these constraints offers an inspiring model for contemporary leaders facing complex challenges.

3. "It is hardly exaggeration to say that Washington was pious as Numa; just as Aristides; temperate as Epictetus; patriotic as Regulus; in giving public trusts, impartial as Severus; in victory modest as Scipio; prudent as Fabius; rapid as Marcellus; undaunted as Hannibal; as Cincinnatus disinterested; to liberty firm as Cato; and respectful of the laws as Lycurgus."[1](#)

This comparison of Washington to classical figures of virtue illustrates how early Americans understood their first president through the lens of classical republicanism. The quote highlights the importance of character in leadership—a timeless concern. In our era, when questions about the character and integrity of public figures are frequently debated, Washington's example of virtue in leadership remains relevant as an aspirational standard, even if the classical references may seem remote to modern readers.

4. "The fundamental division as he saw it was between those favoring a government strong enough to govern and those reluctant to burden the states and the majority with the necessary taxes, federal powers, and enforcement of contracts and debt payments."[2](#)

Marshall's characterization of the fundamental political division of Washington's presidency resonates strongly with contemporary political debates about the proper scope and power of the federal government. The tension between effective governance and limited government, between national authority and local control, continues to animate American politics. This enduring tension suggests that the political challenges Washington faced were not merely contingent but structural features of the American constitutional system.

5. "The war for independence involved a people reluctant to sacrifice, states reluctant to allow a national government strong enough to compel sacrifice, and states and peoples reluctant to support the soldiers and officers who did sacrifice."[2](#)

This insight into the challenges of the Revolutionary War highlights the perennial tension between individual self-interest and collective sacrifice for the common good. In contemporary discussions of taxation, public service, and national unity, this observation remains relevant. It reminds us that the achievement of American independence required overcoming not just external obstacles but internal resistance to the sacrifices necessary for collective action—a challenge that continues to face American democracy.

## **Five Major Ideas**

### **1. The Indispensability of Washington's Leadership**

A central theme of Marshall's biography is that Washington's character and leadership were essential to the success of both the Revolutionary War and the establishment of the new government. Marshall portrays Washington as the "pillar of not only the war effort but the civil effort"[2](#), suggesting that without his steady leadership, the American experiment might have failed. This idea challenges simplistic notions of historical inevitability or purely structural explanations of American success, emphasizing instead the crucial role of individual leadership in historical outcomes. Marshall's Washington embodies the classical republican ideal of the virtuous leader who places public good above private interest, providing a model of leadership that Marshall believed essential for the republic's survival.

### **2. The Necessity of a Strong National Government**

Marshall's biography reflects his Federalist conviction that a robust national government was necessary for America's survival and prosperity. Through his account of the Revolutionary War and the failures of the Articles of Confederation, Marshall illustrates how "the attempt at national self-government under the Articles of Confederation did fail"[2](#) due to insufficient central authority. Washington's frustrations with the Continental Congress's inability to supply the army and the post-war economic and political instability serve as object lessons in the dangers of weak central government. This Federalist perspective would later inform Marshall's landmark Supreme Court decisions strengthening federal authority.

### **3. The Tension Between Democracy and Leadership**

Marshall's work explores what his editor describes as "a case study of the relation between democracy and human greatness"<sup>2</sup>. The biography examines the paradox that while democratic principles emphasize equality and popular sovereignty, the success of the American democratic experiment depended on exceptional leadership. Marshall shows how "Superior leaders' claims to superiority rub against a democracy's pride in equal rights, majority rule, and popular consent. But it is a fact that the American democratic republic depended upon the great man Washington, and it sustained him"<sup>2</sup>. This tension between democratic equality and the need for distinguished leadership remains a central challenge in democratic governance.

### **4. The Fragility of the Republican Experiment**

Throughout his biography, Marshall emphasizes that the success of the American republic was not predetermined but contingent and precarious. He "shows how the republican experiment might have failed. It was likely to have failed"<sup>2</sup>. This perspective challenges triumphalist narratives of American exceptionalism, highlighting instead the real dangers and challenges that threatened the young republic. By emphasizing the fragility of republican government, Marshall underscores the vigilance and virtue required to maintain it—a message that remains relevant to contemporary concerns about democratic backsliding and institutional decay.

### **5. The Cultivation of National Unity**

Marshall's biography presents Washington as a unifying figure whose leadership transcended regional and partisan divisions. In portraying Washington's efforts to build national institutions and foster a sense of shared American identity, Marshall advances his own vision of national unity under a strong constitution. This theme reflects Marshall's concern with the divisive partisanship of his own era and his belief that national cohesion was essential to the republic's survival. The biography thus serves not only as historical account but as political intervention, using Washington's example to advocate for national unity over factional division.

## **Three Major Controversies**

### **1. Partisan Bias and Historical Objectivity**

Marshall's biography generated controversy for its perceived partisan bias. As a committed Federalist writing during Jefferson's presidency, Marshall's portrayal of Washington emphasized aspects of his career and character that aligned with Federalist principles. The first two volumes "were poorly-received and seen by many as an attack on the Democratic-Republican Party"<sup>8</sup>. Critics questioned whether Marshall could provide an objective account given his political commitments and personal connection to Washington. This controversy reflects broader questions about historical objectivity and the relationship between political perspective and historical interpretation that continue to animate historiographical debates. While later historians

have "often praised the accuracy and well-reasoned judgments of Marshall's biography"<sup>8</sup>, they have also noted his reliance on and paraphrasing of existing sources like "William Gordon's 1801 history of the Revolution and the British Annual Register"<sup>810</sup>.

## **2. Washington's Character and Motivations**

Marshall's portrayal of Washington as a model of disinterested virtue has been challenged by subsequent scholarship suggesting more complex motivations. Some historians have argued that "George Washington was a deliberate political actor, motivated by a desire for self-aggrandizement and social status" who "operated within the strictures of a patronage system, advancing his personal interest through the employment of a deferential and disinterested persona"<sup>1</sup>. This revisionist perspective contends that Washington's public image of disinterested service was a calculated persona that masked more conventional ambitions. The controversy over Washington's true character and motivations reflects broader debates about the gap between public image and private reality in political leadership, and the extent to which even revered historical figures acted from mixed motives.

## **3. The Role of the Federal Government**

Perhaps the most enduring controversy stemming from Marshall's biography concerns its Federalist vision of governance. Marshall portrays the failures of the Continental Congress and the Articles of Confederation as evidence for the necessity of a strong central government, using Washington's experiences to support Federalist political principles. This interpretation placed Marshall at odds with Jeffersonian Republicans who favored more limited federal power and greater state autonomy. The fundamental division Marshall identified—"between those favoring a government strong enough to govern and those reluctant to burden the states and the majority with the necessary taxes, federal powers, and enforcement of contracts and debt payments"<sup>2</sup>—continues to animate American political debate. The controversy over Marshall's Federalist interpretation of Washington's legacy reflects the ongoing tension between national authority and local control in American political life.

## **In Closing**

Civic-minded Americans should read "The Life of George Washington" for several compelling reasons. First, it offers unparalleled insight into the founding era from one who lived through it and helped shape it. Marshall's biography provides not just a portrait of Washington but a window into the challenges and achievements of the revolutionary generation, offering valuable historical context for understanding contemporary American institutions and debates.

Second, the biography illuminates the character and leadership qualities that enabled Washington to lead the Continental Army to victory and establish the precedents of the presidency. In an age when leadership is often reduced to charisma or ideological purity, Washington's example of

steady judgment, moral courage, and commitment to republican principles offers a more substantive model of leadership worth emulating.

Third, Marshall's work explores fundamental questions about the relationship between democracy and leadership that remain relevant today. How can a democratic society reconcile its commitment to equality with the need for distinguished leadership? How can leaders exercise authority while respecting democratic constraints? Marshall's exploration of these tensions through Washington's career offers valuable insights for contemporary democratic citizenship.

Fourth, the biography provides a Federalist perspective on American governance that, while controversial, has profoundly shaped American institutions. Understanding this perspective is essential for engaging thoughtfully with ongoing debates about federal power, states' rights, and constitutional interpretation.

Finally, reading Marshall's biography allows civic-minded Americans to engage with one of the foundational texts of American national identity. By understanding how Washington was portrayed by a contemporary who knew him, readers can better appreciate how the Washington mythology has shaped American civic culture and national self-understanding.

In sum, Marshall's "Life of George Washington" offers not just historical knowledge but civic wisdom—insights into leadership, governance, and the challenges of maintaining a republic that remain as relevant today as they were when Marshall first put pen to paper. For Americans seeking to understand their nation's past and contribute thoughtfully to its future, this canonical work provides an invaluable resource.

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Answer from Perplexity: [pplx.ai/share](https://pplx.ai/share)