

Chapter 5

WHAT CAN WE SAVE FROM THE PAST?

I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.

—Abraham Lincoln

The myths, legends, and history surveyed in Chapters 2 through 4 have been enshrined in the national consciousness. The figure of George Washington has been honored on Washington's Birthday; it was the first holiday to celebrate an American individual. (It was later expanded to include Lincoln on Presidents' Day). The events and impulses that led to the Declaration of Independence and Constitutional Convention find their echoes in the July 4 celebrations. Finally, the figures of Squanto and Pocahontas acquire a particular significance in relation to Thanksgiving.

Washington and Lincoln: Cultural Renewal and Freedom

The "Tamanend tradition" humorously equated Washington with the Indian patron saint; that was undoubtedly an ironic detour of popular wisdom. What about this intuition? In the figure of Tamanend reecho traits of the great spiritual teacher, known by the name Deganawidah, who lived and taught in the American Northeast, not far from Tamanend's Philadelphia. The tradition of this great initiate of the Americas, Deganawidah, re-echoes the great initiate of the time of Christ by the manner of his birth and other traits. He overshadows Tamanend himself.

We can call the composite figure of Tamanend a cultural or "civilizing hero," someone who can give a new evolutionary impulse to his people. Among Tamanend's feats are the introduction of agricultural practices and technological innovations that allowed new growth of population, and the blessings of a general state of peace among the tribes. But those innovations are just the consequences of a general reassessment of values, through which the whole of society operates at a new evolutionary stage. Everyone is elevated and all of society benefits. Tamanend could achieve this only because of the inspiration that he received from the Great Spirit. Tamanend could be considered this continent's equivalent of a Buddha. Although it is less obvious to us, America too has had its great teachers, those through whom new cultural steps could be achieved. Tamanend is a composite created in the collective mind, representing the role of a great teacher and leader. Nevertheless, the composite points to real historical figures, as Latham Mitchill intuited in the myth he delivered in his oration, which was referred to earlier.

What do we find in Washington that makes him unique? We have described an individual who was exceptional even from the physical standpoint; for instance, his stature, his physical prowess, his seemingly indifferent attitude in his brushes with death.

But that is only a beginning. Washington had a lifelong cultivation of character that describes a unique trajectory. An incredible force of will led him from an early, undifferentiated ambition to a complete dedication to an ideal that he served unswervingly. His deep inner life, which can be perceived in his life of prayer and his devotion to the ideals of Freemasonry, allowed him to mold and curb his own willful temperament and offer it in service to the whole. At no time did he exercise his tremendous willpower against Congress or his opponents. He espoused a complete alignment of means and ends. And this resolve culminated in his selfless renunciation of power, one of those rare historical gestures that set a precedent. He first renounced a crown, and later renounced power after his second term as President. No ruler before him in history had ever willingly done so.

This seemingly small gesture by Washington, renouncing power, paved the way for something the world had not known before: government of the people, by the people. With Washington the “New World” stepped into the next stage of reality. It is hard to measure how much of this was due to the figure of one man. It is clear that he worked in conjunction with many others, but together with Benjamin Franklin, he took a leading role. Washington truly was the equivalent of a Tamanend, a “First One,” a moral and spiritual leader to the nation. It is no doubt for this reason that in the time of deepest despair, in the winter of Valley Forge, a vision was vouchsafed to Washington that confirms what has been said so far about him, and presents the dimension of his deeds in the unfolding history of the United States.

At Valley Forge Washington was surprised and pleased at the loyalty of his men, but still very much at a loss to see a clear path. At this point in his life Washington turned, more than ever, to his life of prayer, somehow believing that the American people were guided and protected by the agency of divine providence. He felt that he himself had been protected from bullets and illnesses in innumerable circumstances.

In the winter of 1778, when all seemed hopeless Washington, deeply alone and discouraged, had been praying and meditating in the woods. His aide, Anthony Sherman, had been building a fire for Washington, who was working at a dispatch. Washington’s words were recorded by Sherman: “This afternoon, as I was sitting at this table engaged in preparing a dispatch, something seemed to disturb me. Looking up [in front of the fire] I beheld standing opposite a singularly beautiful female.”⁽¹⁾ And further “My thought itself became paralyzed! A new influence, mysterious, potent, irresistible, took possession of me! All I could do was gaze steadily, vacantly at my unknown visitant.” Finally, the general found his voice to inquire about the presence. He did so four times without receiving an answer.

The presence took on a new form. “Gradually the surrounding atmosphere seemed filled with sensations, and grew luminous. Everything about me seemed to rarefy; the mysterious visitor herself becoming more airy and yet more distinct to my sight than ever.” What is most interesting about this stage was the change in Washington’s consciousness. “I next began to feel as one dying, or rather to experience the sensation which I sometimes imagined accompanies dissolution [death]. I did not think, I did not reason. I did not move. All that was impossible. I was conscious only of gazing fixedly at my companion.”

Washington’s change of consciousness made possible the revelations of the being, who called for Washington’s attention: “Son of the Republic, look and learn!” The

being then took Washington to a spiritual landscape in which he saw, as if spread out in front of him, the continents of the earth. The angelic vision “dipping water out of the ocean in the hollow of each hand,” sprinkled some of the water over America and some over Europe. A cloud arose from each side of the ocean, converging over the waters, then moving to the west and enveloping America. The process was repeated a second time, and a third. After the third time, Washington saw villages, towns, and cities filling the landscape, one after another.

What happened next can only have seemed shrouded in mystery to the general, so prophetic were its images of times yet to come. Later published in the *National Tribune* (Dec. 1880), it is worth quoting at length.

And with this the dark, shadowy figure turned its face southward, and from Africa I saw an ill-omened specter approaching our land. It flitted slowly over every city and every town of the latter. The inhabitants presently set themselves in battle against each other. As I continued looking at the bright angel, on whose brow rested a crown of light on which was traced the word “Union, ” I saw the angel place an American flag between the divided nation, and say, “Remember, ye are brethren.” Instantly, the inhabitants, casting from them their weapons, became friends once more, and united around the National Standard.”

After this vision, another of yet later times came into view, preceded once more by the fateful injunction, “Son of the Republic, look and learn.” This time the angelic being took water from the ocean and cast it over Europe, Asia, and Africa. From these continents hordes of armed men came over America, devastating the country. Another time the angel cast water upon America, and clouds and armies drew back, giving victory to the country. Once again, cities and towns blossomed anew, and the angel proclaimed, “While the stars remain in the heaven and send down dew upon the earth, so long shall the union last.”

The vision started to dissolve, but before taking its leave, the angelic visitor instructed the general, “Son the Republic, what you have just seen is thus interpreted: Three great perils will come upon the Republic. The most fearful is the third; but the whole world united shall not prevail against her.” Washington, recollecting the whole, summed up the experience in this way: “. . .[I] felt I had seen a vision wherein had been shown to me the birth, progress, and destiny of the United States.” Washington entrusted the entire story of his vision at Valley Forge to his aide, Anthony Sherman, who took abundant notes at the time. It was later published in the December 1880 issue of the *National Tribune* (volume 4, number 12).

Congress first established a federal holiday honoring George Washington in 1879. Washington's Birthday was first the interest of the Capitol alone, but by 1885 it included all federal offices. This first holiday by which America honored one of its citizens was at first regularly held on February 22, the date of Washington's birthday. In 1971 it was moved to the third Monday in February.

In recognition of what was already being celebrated in a dozen states, there was an attempt to change the name to Presidents' Day to honor at the same time Washington and Lincoln (February 12). This explains why the date chosen in 1971 falls between the

two dates. In some places the holiday had been re-named “Presidents’ Day” or even “Washington and Lincoln Day.” Although the proposal was not accepted at the time, we have now moved in that direction, and we cannot but help see the thread between the two presidents, as it had been pointed out to Washington in the second tableau of his vision at Valley Forge, the part of the vision that points to a civil war, and to the threat associated with Africa.

In bringing together remembrance of Washington and Lincoln, the American soul showed a yearning for completion. What Washington accomplished for his century, Lincoln moved forward in the following century. No president left as powerful a stamp on American history as Washington, our first president. No president was as deeply imbued with spiritual and moral forces as was Lincoln, our sixteenth president. Washington was the first famous slave-owner to free his slaves. His insight about the root cause of slavery, and his desire to see this social ill uprooted, found a continuation in Lincoln.

The moral impulse toward freedom that propelled Lincoln in the nineteenth century needed a continuation in the twentieth, and that is what Martin Luther King brought into further manifestation. Not surprisingly, another personal holiday has been created for him. Chapter 6 explores King’s life and influence on our society.