# George Washington and Religion

*Kerby Anderson presents a compelling argument for the view that George Washington was a devoted Christian rather than a deist. He points to Washington's insistence on the importance of services for his soldiers, his personal church attendance, his prayer life and his commitment to the spiritual upbringing of his godchildren.*

## Background



What was George Washington's view of religion and in particular of Christianity? The historical perspective used to be that Washington was a Christian and orthodox in most of his beliefs. But the modern view has been that he was a either a lukewarm Anglican or more likely a Deist.

I want to look at some new research that argues for the traditional view and against the modern view of George Washington's religion. One book is *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of our Country*.{1} It is written by Michael Novak (American Enterprise Institute and winner of the Templeton Award) and Jana Novak. Another book, written by Peter Lillback with Jerry Newcombe, is *George Washington's Sacred Fire*.{2}

George Washington was born into a Virginia family of moderate wealth and was exposed to various religious activities: lessons in religion, regular prayer, Sunday school attendance, and reverence for God. His mother had a daily ritual of retiring with a book of religious readings.

By the time he was a teenager, Washington had already assumed serious responsibilities as a professional surveyor and then

as a major in the Virginia militia. His adventures in the wild lands gave him invaluable lessons about the military, Indians, and the British. Years later in a speech to the Delaware chiefs, Washington said, “You do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ. These will make you a greater and happier people than you are.”{3}

He studied the Bible as well as the writings of ancient heroes. The busts and portraits at Mount Vernon demonstrate this. There are busts of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charles XII of Sweden, and Frederick II of Prussia. In the dining room are portraits of the Virgin Mary and St. John.

Washington’s own stepgranddaughter “Nelly” Custis saw him as a religious man. She wrote this to one of Washington’s early biographers:

> It was his custom to retire to his library at nine or ten o’clock, where he remained an hour before he went to his chamber. He always rose before the sun, and remained in his library until called to breakfast. I never witnessed his private devotions. I never inquired about them. I should have thought it the greatest heresy to doubt his firm belief in Christianity. His life, his writings, prove that he was a Christian. He was not one of those who act or pray, “that they may be seen of men.” He communed with his God in secret.{4}

In what follows we will look at the evidence for George Washington’s faith as it surfaced in his letters and actions as general and president.

## Deism vs. Christianity

Pick up a book about George Washington written during the nineteenth century, and you will probably see that he is described as being a Christian. However, if you pick up a book

written in the last seventy years, it will describe him as a Deist. Why the change?

The turning point seems to be a study by historian Paul F. Boller, Jr. entitled *George Washington and Religion*. His conclusion can be summarized in a single sentence: To the "unbiased observer" George Washington appears as a Deist, not a devout Christian.{5} Most historians since Boller accepted this idea and were less likely to assert that Washington was a Christian.

What do we mean by "Deism"? Deism is the belief that God is merely a watchmaker God who started the universe but is not involved in the affairs of humans and human history. One definition of Deism is that "There is no special providence; no miracles or other divine interventions intrude upon the lawful natural order."{6}

Was George Washington a Deist? He was not. It is worth noting that even historian Paul Boller admitted that religion was important to Washington as a leader. Boller writes, "he saw to it that divine services were performed by the chaplains as regularly as possible on the Sabbath for the soldiers under his command."{7} We might reasonably ask, Why would chaplains be important to a Deist?

Boller even admits there are testimonials of Washington's church attendance. This is important since many historians even go further than Boller and assert that Washington did not even attend church as a mature adult.

Michael Novak admits that some of the names Washington often used for God *sound* Deist, but that does not mean that he was a Deist. In fact, his prayers for God's action were just the opposite of what you might hear from a Deist. Washington believed God favored the cause of liberty and should be beseeched to "interpose" his action on behalf of the Americans. He called for public thanksgiving for the many ways

in which Americans experienced God's hand in key events in our history.

Washington used more than eighty terms to refer to God, among them: Almighty God, Creator, Divine Goodness, Father of all mercies, and Lord of Hosts. The most common term he used in his writings and speeches was "Providence." When he did so, he used the masculine personal pronoun "he." Washington never refers directly to God as an "it," as he does occasionally with Providence. God is personal.{8)

If we look at the history of the eighteenth century, there were many with orthodox religious beliefs who sometimes used the philosophical language of the enlightenment. Washington was a Christian, even though he often used terms for God associated with Deists.

## A Religious Nation Goes to War

There has been some dispute about how religious America was during the Revolutionary War. There was a shortage of churches and clergy (especially along the paths of westward migration). But we should also remember that this War of Independence followed the First Great Awakening.

At the first meeting of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia (September 1774), the first motion from the floor was for prayer to seek guidance from God. But there was resistance, not because of the prayer, but because of the theological disagreements among the members (Anabaptist, Quakers, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians). Sam Adams settled the dispute by saying he was no bigot and could pray along with any minister as long as he was a patriot.{9} I have in my office a picture of a painting showing George Washington praying with men like Patrick Henry, John Jay, and Richard Henry Lee.

At the second meeting, they proposed that Washington be

appointed commander in chief of the Continental Army. He did not think he was equal to the command but accepted it. He wrote his wife, “I shall rely, therefore, confidently on that Providence, which has heretofore preserved and been bountiful to me, not doubting but that I shall return safe to you in the fall.”{10} At the time, Washington was the only man on the continent in uniform since no Continental Army yet existed. To the British, he was the supreme traitor, in open rebellion to the King. His neck was at risk, and the American independence depended on him.

One event that George Washington believed showed God’s providence was the Battle of Long Island in 1776. Washington and his men were trapped on Brooklyn Heights, Long Island. The British were poised to crush the American army the next day and that would have been the end of the rebellion. Washington planned a bold move and began evacuating his troops under the cover of darkness using everything from fishing vessels to rowboats. But there was not enough time to accomplish the task. When morning came, the fog of night remained and only lifted in time for the British to see the last American boat crossing the East River beyond the reach of their guns. You can read more about this miraculous event in Michael Novak’s book, *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding*.{11}

Washington also required chaplains for the Continental Army, and personally took time for prayer. He forbade his troops under pain of death from uttering blasphemies, even profanity. He called upon them to conduct themselves as Christian soldiers because the people demanded it.{12}

Washington’s actions during the Revolutionary War demonstrate his Christian character.

## First in War and First in Peace

In his eulogy for George Washington, Henry Lee said he was "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." We could also say the Washington demonstrated Christian character both in war and in peace.

While fulfilling his duties as general, he came to be known as a "nursing father." This is a biblical phrase (Num. 11:12, Is. 49:23 KJV) that appears in many of the tributes to Washington after his death. He brought together very diverse groups to fight the Revolutionary War by bridging ethnic and social divisions. This ranged from the regiment from Marblehead, Massachusetts (that included men of mixed race, blacks, and Indians), to the Virginian and southern aristocrats to the yeomen in hunting shirts from western Virginia.

One of his orders stated that "All chaplains are to perform divine service tomorrow, and on every succeeding Sunday. . . . The commander in chief expects an exact compliance with this order, and that it be observed in future as an invariable rule of practice—and every neglect will be consider not only a breach of orders, but a disregard to decency, virtue and religion."{13}

Washington grew even more explicit as the war dragged on: "While we are zealously performing the duties of good citizens and soldiers we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of religion. To the distinguished character of patriot, it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished character of a Christian."{14}

Washington lost a great deal of money during the war by paying for things out of his own pocket and by refusing a salary. He happily returned to Mount Vernon and spent happy years with his wife. But the constitutional convention in 1787 brought him to elective office. He was elected as president by unanimous vote in 1789.

In his inaugural address, Washington said, “No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.”

He issued a thanksgiving proclamation in 1789 in which he asserted “the duty of all nations” in regard to God. His thanksgiving proclamation of 1795 proclaims there are signs of “Divine beneficence” in the world. And in his farewell address, he reminded Americans that “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports.”

Washington demonstrated Christian character in war and in peace.

## Washington as Christian: Pro and Con

Let’s summarize the arguments historians make about Washington’s religious faith. Those who believe that George Washington was a Deist and not a Christian usually make the following observations.

First, Washington never took communion at Sunday services. Second, he refused to declare his specific beliefs in public. Third, he rarely used the name of Jesus Christ in private correspondence and in public utterances. Finally, while he believed in God and had an awareness of Providence in his life, it all seems more like a Greek or Roman view of fate.

Michael Novak’s response to these observations is helpful. “All these objections have a grain of truth in them. Still, they are consistent with Washington’s being a serious Christian who believed that he had a public vocation that required some tact regarding his private confessional life.”{15} Novak adds:

> It is not at all unusual for public men in pluralistic American life to maintain a notable reserve about their private convictions. They do not burden the public with declarations of their deepest beliefs, whose general force they trust their actions will sufficiently reveal. In the public forum, they happily give to Caesar what is Caesar's and in the private forum, to God what is God's.{16}

What are some of the reasons to believe Washington was a Christian? First, he religiously observed the Sabbath as a day of rest and frequently attended church services on that day. Second, many report that Washington reserved time for private prayer. Third, Washington saved many of the dozens of sermons sent to him by clergymen, and read some of them aloud to his wife.

Fourth, Washington hung paintings of the Virgin Mary and St. John in places of honor in his dining room in Mount Vernon. Fifth, the chaplains who served under him during the long years of the Revolutionary War believed Washington was a Christian. Sixth, Washington (unlike Thomas Jefferson) was never accused by the press or his opponents of not being a Christian.

It is also worth noting that, unlike Jefferson, Washington agreed to be a godparent for at least eight children. This was far from a casual commitment since it required the godparents to agree to help insure that a child was raised in the Christian faith. Washington not only agreed to be a godparent, but presented his godsons and goddaughters with Bibles and prayer books.

George Washington was not a Deist who believed in a "watchmaker God." He was a Christian and demonstrated that Christian character throughout his life.

**Notes**

1. Michael Novak and Jana Novak, *Washington's God: Religion,*

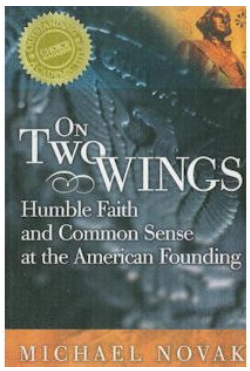
*Liberty, and the Father of our Country* (NY: Basic Books, 2006).
2. Peter Lillback, with Jerry Newcombe, *George Washington's Sacred Fire* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Providence Forum Press, 2006.
3. Novak, *Washington's God*, 93.
4. Ibid., 136.
5. Lillback, *Sacred Fire*, 28.
6. Novak, *Washington's God*, 110.
7. Lillback, *Sacred Fire*, 28.
8. Ibid., 577.
9. Novak, *Washington's God*, 123.
10. Ibid, 64.
11. Michael Novak, *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2002).
12. Novak, *Washington's God*, 30-31.
13. Ibid., 90.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 219.
16. Ibid., 219-220.

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# On Two Wings

## Introduction




Michael Novak has been and continues to be one of the most influential intellectuals of our time. Author of more than thirty books, he has been a professor at Harvard, Stanford, and Notre Dame and was awarded the $1 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

So it is significant that his recent book, *On Two Wings*, documents the Judeo-Christian foundations of this country and disputes the teaching that the American Founders were secular Enlightenment rationalists. Instead, he persuasively argues that they were the creators of a unique American blend of biblical faith, practical reason, and human liberty.

In his preface, Michael Novak says, "Although I have wanted to write this book for some forty years, my own ignorance stood in the way. It took me a long time, time spent searching up many byways and neglected paths, and fighting through a great deal of conventional (but mistaken) wisdom, to learn how many erroneous perceptions I had unconsciously drunk in from public discussion."{1}

Novak believes that "most of us grow up these days remarkably ignorant of the hundred men most responsible for leading this country into a War for Independence and writing our nation's Constitution."{2}

The way American history has been told for the last century is incomplete. Secular historians have "cut off one of the two wings by which the American eagle flies." The founding generation established a compact with the God of Israel "and relied upon this belief. Their faith is an *indispensable* part of their story."{3}

Historical research by a number of scholars documents the significant influence of the Bible on the founders. Two decades ago, Constitutional scholars and political historians (including one of my professors at Georgetown University) assembled 15,000 writings from the Founding Era. They counted 3154 citations in these writings. They found that the two political philosophers most often quoted were Montesquieu and Blackstone. But surprisingly, the reference most quoted was the Bible. It was quoted 34 percent of the time. This was nearly four times as often as Montesquieu or Blackstone and 12 times more often than John Locke.

While secular historians point to Locke as the source of the ideas embodied in Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, they usually fail to note the older influence of other authors and the Bible. "Before Locke was even born, the Pilgrims believed in the consent of the governed, social compacts, the dignity of every child of God, and political equality."{4} By forcing a secular interpretation onto America's founding history, these secular historians ignore the second wing by which the American eagle took flight.

## Philosophical Assumptions of the Founders of this Country

First, the Bible was the one book that literate Americans in the 18th century could be expected to know well. Biblical imagery was a central part of American life. For example, Thomas Jefferson suggested as a design for the Seal of the United States a representation of the children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night.

Second, the founders believed that time "was created for the *unfolding of human liberty*, for human emancipation. This purpose requires humans to choose for or against building cities worthy of the ideals God sets before them: liberty,

justice, equality, self-government, and brotherhood."{5}

The first paragraph of *The Federalist* describes this important moment with destiny:

> *It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.{6}*

The founders believed that they could learn from history and put together piece by piece what they called "an improved science of politics." History, they believed, was a record of progress (or decline) measured against God's standards and learned from personal and historical experience.

Third, the founders also held that everything in creation was intelligible and thus discernible through reason and rational evaluation. They also believed that God was The Creator and thus gave us life and liberty. Thomas Jefferson said, "The God Who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time."

Novak concludes that without this philosophical foundation, "the founding generation of Americans would have had little heart for the War of Independence. They would have had no ground for believing that their seemingly unlawful rebellion actually fulfilled the will of God – and suited the laws of nature and nature's God. Consider the jeopardy in which their rebellion placed them: When they signed the Declaration, they were committing treason in the King's eyes. If their frail efforts failed, their flagrant betrayal of the solemn oaths of loyalty they had sworn to their King doomed them to a public hanging. Before future generations, their children would be disgraced. To still their trembling, they pled their case before a greater and wholly undeceivable Judge, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the Rectitude of our

Intentions."{7}

## Seven Events in the Founding of this Country

The first event was the first act of the First Continental Congress in September 1774. When the delegates gathered in Philadelphia, their purpose was to remind King George of the rights due them as Englishmen. But as they gathered, news arrived that Charlestown had been raked by cannon shot while red-coated landing parties surged through its streets.

The first motion of the Congress proposed a public prayer. Some of the delegates spoke against the motion because, they argued, Americans were so divided in religious sentiments (Episcopalians, Quakers, Anabaptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists). Sam Adams arose to say he was no bigot and could hear the prayer from any gentleman of piety and virtue. He proposed that Reverend Duch had earned that character.

The next day, a white-haired Episcopal clergyman dressed in his pontificals pronounced the first official prayer before the Continental Congress. Before this priest knelt men like Washington, Henry, Randolph, Rutledge, Lee, and Jay. The emotion in the room was palpable. John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail that he "had never heard a better prayer, or one so well pronounced." He went on to say that it was "enough to melt a heart of stone. I saw tears gush into the eyes of the old, grave pacific Quakers of Philadelphia."{8}

The second event was the sermon by John Witherspoon of Princeton on May 17, 1776. In this pivotal sermon, Witherspoon who had opposed the rebellion went over to the side of independence. His influence cannot be overstated. He was James Madison's teacher and he is credited with having taught one vice-president, twelve members of the Continental Congress, five delegates to the Constitutional Convention, forty-nine

U.S. representatives, twenty-eight U.S. Senators, three Supreme Court justices, and scores of officers in the Continental Army. His sermons were printed in over 500 Presbyterian churches throughout the colonies.

His message centered on the doctrine of divine providence. He argued that even things that seem harmful and destructive may be turned to the advantage of the patriots. Even the enemies of law and morality cannot escape being the instruments of Providence. Witherspoon argued that liberty is God's gift and all of creation has been contrived so that out of darkness and despair, freedom will come to fruition.

Michael Novak concludes that, "During the years 1770-1776, the fires of revolution were lit by Protestant divines aflame with the dignity of human conscience. 'To the Pulpit, the Puritan Pulpit,' wrote John Wingate Thornton, 'We owe the moral force which won our independence.'"{9}

The third event was the writing of the Declaration of Independence. Its very form was that of a traditional American prayer, similar to the Mayflower Compact. In essence, it was only the latest in a long series of local and regional covenants which put all governmental bodies on notice by establishing a national compact.

The fifty-six signers of the Declaration were mostly Christian and represented mostly Christian people. The four names that these signers gave to God were: Lawgiver (as in "Laws of Nature and Nature's God"), Creator ("endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights"), Judge ("appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions"), and Providence ("with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence").

Novak points out that "Three of these names (Creator, Judge, Providence) unambiguously derive from Judaism and came to America via Protestant Christianity. The fourth name for God,

‘Lawgiver,’ could be considered Greek or Roman as well as Hebraic. But Richard Hooker showed that long tradition had put ‘Lawgiver,’ too, in a Biblical context.”{10}

The fourth event was a national day of prayer. Only five months after the Declaration, “the pinch and suffering of war and a poor harvest seriously imperiled morale.” Congress set aside December 11, 1776 as a Day of Fasting and Repentance.

The fifth event occurred when George Washington became commander of the amateurs who became the Continental Army. He knew he had to prepare them for the adversity to come. “To stand with swollen chests in a straight line, beneath snapping flags, to the music of fife and drums is one thing; to hold your place when the British musketballs roar toward you like a wall of blazing lead, and all around you the flesh of screaming friends and brothers is shredded, is another.”{11}

Washington knew there would be bitter winters and hot summers with no pay and little food. Often the soldiers would have to frequently retreat rather than face frontal combat from the enemy. He knew his only hope was to fashion a godly corps whose faith was placed in the Creator not battlefield victories. So Washington gave orders that each day begin with formal prayer, to be led by officers of each unit. He also ordered that officers of every unit “to procure Chaplains according to the decree of the Continental Congress.” Washington knew that prayer and spiritual discipline were essential to his army’s success.

The sixth event occurred toward the end of the fighting season in late August, 1776. George Washington had assembled 12,000 local militiamen of the Continental Army on Long Island. British Generals Howe, Clinton, Cornwallis, and Percy along with the German Major General von Heister landed a royal detachment twice as large to the rear of the Continental Army. The British took up positions to march swiftly toward the East River to trap Washington’s entire army and put an end to the

American insurrection.

Seeing that they might lose everything, Washington put out a call for every available vessel so that he might ferry his troops by cover of night back to Manhattan. All night the men scoured for boats, marched in silence, and rowed. But by dawn, only a fraction had made their escape. The Americans prepared for the worst. As if in answer to their prayers, a heavy fog rolled in and lasted until noon.

By the time the fog lifted, the entire Army escaped. Many gave thanks to God. And Washington and many others considered it one of those "signal interventions" by Divine Providence that saved the army and allowed the revolution to continue.

The seventh event was the establishment of Thanksgiving near the end of the third year of the war. Congress had many reasons to express thanksgiving to God and to seek His continued mercy and assistance. John Witherspoon was called upon to draft a Thanksgiving Day recollection of those events. The Congress urged the nation to "humbly approach the throne of Almighty God" to ask "that he would establish the independence of these United States upon the basis of religion and virtue."

Following the wartime precedent of the Congress, Washington issued his first Thanksgiving Day Proclamation shortly after becoming president in 1789. He reminded the nation of God's protection and provision in the Battle of Long Island all the way to their victory at Yorktown. Years later Abraham Lincoln, after annual presidential proclamations of Thanksgiving waned, reinstituted a national day of Thanksgiving on November 26, 1863 and the tradition has continued ever since.

## Conclusion

Michael Novak has provided Americans with a great service in documenting the Christian influence in the founding of this

country. This religious influence is the second wing that tapped into the deepest energies of the human spirit and propelled this nation forward through difficult times and great challenges.

It is also fitting that we remember these important religious concepts and their influence on our nation. If we take seriously the words of George Washington in his Farewell Address to the Nation, then our ignorance of our nation's past may yet be our destruction. That is why we must study our history and teach it correctly to the next generation so we may keep the torch of freedom alive for generations to come.

**Notes**

1. Michael Novak, *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2002), 1.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 5.

4. Ibid., 6-7.

5. Ibid., 8-9.

6. *The Federalist Papers,* Number 1.

7. Novak, 12.

8. William Federer, ed. *America's God and Country* (Coppell: TX: FAME, 1994), 137.

9. Novak, 17.

10. Ibid., 17-18.

11. Ibid., 19.

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