Just about every American knows that George Washington was commander-in-chief of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War and the first president of the United States. But very few know much more about him. Reserved, remote, elusive and enigmatic, the childless Father of Our Country seems to many of us to have been born middle-aged, in uniform, with powdered hair and false teeth, atop his famous steed, Old Nelson. Or, as Ron Chernow writes, a stiff figure "composed of too much marble to be quite human."

In Washington: A Life, Chernow, the author of splendid biographies of Alexander Hamilton and John D. Rockefeller, tries to capture the man from Mount Vernon as his contemporaries perceived him: credible, compassionate and charismatic. In his beautifully crafted, nuanced narrative, Chernow suggests that beneath the surface of Washington's buttoned-down personality...
lurched not only a titanic temper, but softer emotions. The struggle to put them in their proper place had an enormous impact on his behavior as a planter, politician, soldier and slaveholder.

Washington's greatness as a military leader should not be ascribed to his skills as a strategist. After all, he lost more battles than he won. And he pushed the French to abort their operation in Yorktown, in favor of a strike against New York. Nonetheless, by sheer force of will, he held together an inexperienced, ill-equipped, often unpaid, motley, mongrel army for more than eight years — while fending off 13 selfish colonies, a feckless Continental Congress and his own doubts and depression.

Chernow makes a compelling case that Washington was the only person capable of converting the Constitution, which said precious little about the presidency, into a "viable, elastic document." In doing so, he reconciled Americans to a strong executive branch, established dozens of precedents, from inaugural addresses to the title "Mr. President," and persuaded skeptics that a republican government could endure without reverting to monarchy — or anarchy.

If he was a savior, Chernow's Washington was also no saint. Anything but an egalitarian, he often railed against the squalor and stupidity of enlisted men. Though he professed to oppose slavery, he regarded bondage as a fair economic exchange, and acknowledged that, in a pinch, he would trade slaves to settle debts. Ever cautious, Washington expressed in his will an earnest wish to emancipate, but deferred a decision until his wife's death.

From beyond the grave, Washington asked family members and friends to temper public adulation by minimizing "tedious tributes." He probably didn't mean it. In any event, as they mourned, Americans turned him into a civic deity. More than two centuries later, thanks in no small measure to Chernow's book, the best single-volume biography of Washington now in print, he's once again a man. And all the more worthy of our admiration.

Ron Chernow is the author of *Alexander Hamilton*, *The House of Morgan*, and *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.*