The defining influence of George Washington

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The Return of George Washington, 1783-1789
By Edward J. Larson
William Morrow. 400 pp. $29.99

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

"The Return of George Washington." (From the book cover)

The Return of George Washington
1783-1789

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In 1783, during a two-day journey through New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland, George Washington, commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, confessed "to a certain pleasing, melancholy sensation."

He was happy because he was leaving his country "in full possession of Liberty and Independence." He was sad "because I bid my friends a long, perhaps a last farewell."

During a six-year retirement at Mount Vernon, Washington remained politically active, working behind the scenes for the adoption of a constitution that would provide a stronger and more energetic national government, Edward Larson writes in *The Return of George Washington*. Without his support, his service as president of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and his willingness to become the first president, the states might not have agreed to a federal union.

Larson, a professor of history at Pepperdine University, sticks close to conventional wisdom. *The Return of George Washington*, however, does provide a detailed and elegantly written account of leadership at the most pivotal moment in our nation's history.

According to Larson, though other politicians would have gained respect for themselves by becoming president, Washington, the military hero and statesman, added prestige to the presidency by accepting an office he did not seek. As president, his words and deeds constituted precedents in substance and tone that defined the office for his successors - and for the American people. Although Washington viewed public opinion as "formidable and fickle," Larson emphasizes that he understood the importance of cultivating it. For his inauguration, he wore a suit made of cloth manufactured in the United States. Though John Adams preferred the title "His most benign Highness" for the newly elected leader of the United States, Washington insisted on "Mr. President." Most important, Larson concludes, Washington assembled a cabinet of worthies from across the political spectrum, restored America's credit, fostered economic and territorial expansion, and established the presidency as an independent and significant branch of government, checked and balanced by the legislature and judiciary.

When he died in 1799, Washington was remembered throughout the nation in military exercises with gun salutes, solemn music, riderless horses, and flag-draped coffins, and with civilian funeral processions and eulogies. In death as in life, he was - as he remains - a unifying force, fully meriting the praise that Representative Henry Lee of Virginia showered on him at a commemoration in Philadelphia: "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

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