

Richard Brookhiser

Honoring George Washington's Legacy: Does American Need a Reminder?

February 29, 2012

I want to tell a story about George Washington and a private in the Continental army. It is a story about leadership.

The Battle of Trenton the day after Christmas 1776 was the first American victory after a string of crushing defeats. It is not too much to say that it saved the Revolution. But Washington knew the British would strike back.

In the New Year Washington put his main force outside Trenton, across a creek. He expected the British to come down from the north, and he had troops guarding the road and the town. Their orders were to make a fighting retreat, then cross the creek over one stone bridge, and rejoin the main army.

We know what happened thanks to an account that John Howland, a private from Rhode Island, wrote many years later. The British arrived in Trenton at four o'clock. Night would fall at quarter to five. The flashing of muskets was visible in the dusk.

Howland wrote, "The bridge was narrow, and our platoons in passing it were crowded into a dense and solid mass, in the rear of which the enemy were making their best efforts." *Narrow, crowded, dense*—he doesn't say anything about panic, but clearly this was a possibility.

On the far side of the creek, Howland remembered, "the noble horse of General Washington stood with his breast pressed close against" the bridge rail.

Washington was watching the retreat. But Howland was watching him.

"The firm, composed and majestic countenance of the general inspired confidence."

Then, almost at the moment of safety, there was a closer contact.

"At the end of the bridge, I pressed against the shoulder of the general's horse and in contact with the boot of the general. The horse stood as firm as the rider, and seemed to understand that he was not to quit his post and station." But so did the soldier.

General Washington was there; Private Howland would do what he had to do.

Woody Allen said that eighty percent of celebrity is showing up. But one hundred percent of leadership is showing up—at the right time, in the right place, and doing the right thing. And when you fail—which you often will—you show up again and again and again, until you prevail.

Washington showed up for almost the whole of the Revolution—eight and a half years. It was our longest war until Vietnam; longer than the Civil War and World War II put together.

Washington showed up again at the Constitutional Convention, which he chaired. James Monroe, who opposed the Constitution, said, "Be assured his influence carried this government."

Washington showed up as first president, for two terms.

And twice, after the war and after his presidency, he went home. During the war, George III was having his picture painted by the American expat artist Benjamin West. He asked West what he thought General Washington would do after the war was over. West said, I believe he will go back to his farm. And the king said, If he does that, he is the greatest man living.

But the Howland story is also about history and how it works. We can talk about generalities—about trends—about principles. We can talk about President’s Day. But the Howland story is about one person inspiring another person. And when John Howland touches George Washington’s horse and his boot, the story reaches out and we feel that touch 230 years later.

That is how history teaches, how it inspires, how it can help us.

You can help George Washington help America, by giving back his holiday.

Richard Brookhiser is the author of *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington*, and seven other books on early American history. He was awarded the National Humanities Medal in 2008. He is a senior editor of *National Review* and a columnist for *American History*.

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2/15/12 202-225-3474

RE: invitation to be April "In Depth" guest

ATTN: RYAN WITTE

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Witness Disclosure Requirement - "Truth in Testimony"
Required by House Rule XI, Clause 2(g)(5)

Name:

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2009. Include the source and amount of each grant or contract.

NONE

2. Please list any entity you are testifying on behalf of and briefly describe your relationship with these entities.

NONE

3. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) received since October 1, 2008, by the entity(ies) you listed above. Include the source and amount of each grant or contract.

NONE

I certify that the above information is true and correct.
Signature:

Richard Brookhiser

Date:

2/22/12