

**Edward J. Larson.** *George Washington, Nationalist*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016. Xii, 139 pp. (\$19.95 cloth).

Edward J. Larson's new book *George Washington, Nationalist* begins with the bold statement that "George Washington was the leading nationalist of the late Revolutionary era in American history" (ix). While Washington certainly stood in great company alongside many of the leading nationalists in American history, Larson makes a compelling claim that Washington's actions during this period demonstrate not only a deep seated desire for national union, but a willingness to act on behalf of the cause in ways that frequently and significantly altered outcomes.

Larson's approach to defending Washington's nationalism is appropriately limited and historical in nature. The book covers the relatively brief time period from 1783 to 1789, and "chronicles his actions during this critical period more than it analyzes his ideas" since "Washington was a man of inspired action rather than deep thought" (ix). While the book's focus on action rather than ideas initially seems limiting, it ultimately allows for a more honest and useful reflection of Washington's own political thought.

To some readers, and to scholars of the American founding in particular, it may seem that Washington's nationalism is a given or should be taken for granted. But while we often think of Washington's persona as a nationalizing and galvanizing force, Larson shows that this line of thinking undersells his role as an actor in the political arena during the mid to late 1780s. At a time when revolution and revision seemed constant, we find Washington playing a direct role and pushing for nationalist policies at nearly every key moment.

The book highlights roughly ten significant actions Washington took over five distinct time periods that divide the chapters. These actions include his speech to the officers at Newburgh and circular letter to the 13 state governments in 1783, his trip to view land holdings in the west and presidency of the Potomac Company in 1784 and 1785, and his attendance at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 and the dramatic effects his presence had in shaping the office of the presidency. After the Convention, Larson focuses on Washington's private and public lobbying for the Constitution between 1787 and 1789, and his assumption of the presidency in grand and ultimately highly democratic fashion in April of 1789.

While Larson does not go to any lengths to define the term nationalism, the book's chronology of events allows us to see that Washington pursued a range of nationalist strategies. The first could be called nationalization or centralization of power. Washington clearly advocated for the creation of a strong central government with significant peacetime authority over the states. He believed that the fate of the union lay in its willingness to give up the confederal system in favor of one that secured national sovereignty and guaranteed the central government enough power to stymie state action. The second variation of nationalism Washington advocated is closer to what we now call patriotism, or a sense of national pride among the American people. Larson describes Washington's trip west to inspect his frontier properties between 1784 and 1785. On that trip Washington "detected little loyalty to the United States in the white settlers that he encountered on the frontier" and warned that "the ties of consanguinity which are weakened every day will soon be no bond" (33). Washington

sought to encourage trans-Appalachian communication and eventually took on leadership of the Potomac Company in an effort partly to support his own landholdings in the West, but also because he saw it as the “cement of interest to bind all parts of the Union together by indissoluble bonds” (37). By focusing specifically on Washington’s actions rather than the roots of his political philosophy we get a more diverse and varied sense of both the types of nationalism Washington sought to encourage, and the way that he thought about the relationship between the consolidation of national power and the advance of feelings of national pride among the public.

Larson’s focus on events rather than theory or ideas leads to a second interesting and often overlooked insight. During these tumultuous years Washington served simultaneously as a proponent of centralization and as a tool to nationalize public sentiment and identity. At times Washington clearly takes direct action to advance the cause of Union – as he does in his Circular to the States and in his attendance at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. At other times, however, Washington becomes a tool of nationalism or a mechanism by which other political leaders convince the public of the benefits of Union. This occurs most consequentially during the ratification period when Washington’s public silence allowed the Constitution’s advocates to use his image to calm nerves about the scope of the presidency and national sovereignty. Once he assumed the presidency Washington turned the office into a “source for American identity” as “the only feature of the new government that had captured popular imagination” (92, 101). The reader is left with the distinct impression that Washington was equally effective as a political actor and as a tool of public patriotism. The dynamic between those two roles is a particularly compelling feature revealed by Larson’s detailed research and narrative perspective.

While the book is brief and focuses only on the actions of one man in relation to a single topic over a short period of time, it ultimately proves particularly useful and compelling because of these very elements. Meticulously researched and written in a fluid narrative style, this introduction to Washington as a political actor will prove useful to scholars of history and political theory alike. As the old adage goes, “actions speak louder than words,” and a man who took action so carefully deserves to be studied that way.

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