



George Washington (The American Presidents Series)

By James MacGregor Burns, Susan Dunn

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A premier leadership scholar and an eighteenth-century expert define the special contributions and qualifications of our first president

Revolutionary hero, founding president, and first citizen of the young republic, George Washington was the most illustrious public man of his time, a man whose image today is the result of the careful grooming of his public persona to include the themes of character, self-sacrifice, and destiny.

As Washington sought to interpret the Constitution's assignment of powers to the executive branch and to establish precedent for future leaders, he relied on his key advisers and looked to form consensus as the guiding principle of government. His is a legacy of a successful experiment in collective leadership, great initiatives in establishing a strong executive branch, and the formulation of innovative and lasting economic and foreign policies. James MacGregor Burns and Susan Dunn also trace the arc of Washington's increasing dissatisfaction with public life and the seeds of dissent and political parties that, ironically, grew from his insistence on consensus. In this compelling and balanced biography, Burns and Dunn give us a rich portrait of the man behind the carefully crafted mythology.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Like other volumes in the American Presidents series, edited by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., this biographical essay focuses on a handful of themes through which to examine Washington's life before and during his presidency. The book's first half examines how Washington, "ferociously ambitious" and "fiercely protective of his own reputation," meticulously crafted his public image, even years before the American Revolution, to emphasize the virtues of self-sacrifice and dignity. While acknowledging the extent to which Washington craved esteem from others, the authors are basically sympathetic, framing his ambition within the context of his role in defining the young nation's political institutions. In fact, Washington is somewhat invisible during passages depicting the power struggles among subordinates in the first administration. This allows Burns (a Pulitzer winner for *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom*) and Dunn (also Burns's coauthor on *The Three Roosevelts*) to build on the former's theories about "transforming leadership" (which he presented in a book of that title) and to praise Washington's creation of a collective leadership, rather than establishing a solitary ruling authority, as an achievement "never to be surpassed in American presidential history." The authors also offer a frank appraisal of how Washington inadvertently sowed the seeds of political discord even as he developed national unity. This compact appraisal won't radically alter anybody's perspective on Washington. But its points are made briefly without sacrificing substance.

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From [Booklist](#)

The excellently crafted American Presidents series, edited by Arthur Schlesinger, continues with a top-notch biography of Washington. In similar fashion to the other entries in this series, the authors concern themselves primarily with their subject as a political animal. According to Burns and Dunn, Washington was not only the first president but also set an enduring precedent for his successors by meticulously crafting and promoting his own sterling public image. Though historically viewed as a strong individual leader, Washington also excelled at forging a consensus among his allies and advisors. Where he failed, perhaps, was in his misguided endeavor to quash any dissenting points of view--an endeavor that had the contrary effect of polarizing and strengthening opposing political parties. This scholarly analysis of the inaugural presidency provides an enlightening new slant on a timeless subject. *Margaret Flanagan*

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Review

"A remarkable example of narrative and biographical history at its best."

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