Introduction

Eight years after George Washington's death, John Adams penned this letter to Benjamin Rush explaining why George Washington was considered a hero by the American people. He wrote it on November 11, 1807, in response to a letter from Rush that described Washington as "self-taught in all the arts which gave him his immense elevation above all his fellow citizens."¹ Adams disagreed. The physical "talents" Adams attributes to Washington include a "handsome Face," an "elegant Form," and "graceful Attitudes and Movement"—all features Adams himself could not claim. He concludes:

Here you See I have made out ten Talents without saying a Word about Reading Thinking or writing, upon all which Subjects you have Said all that need be Said. – You See I Use the word Talents in a larger Sense than usual, comprehending every Advantage. Genius Experience, Learning, Fortune Birth, Health are all Talents, though I know not how, the Word has been lately confined to the faculties of the Mind.

The bitterness Adams displays may have had more to do with his own lack of public recognition than a dislike of Washington himself.

Excerpt

Self taught or Book learned in the Arts, our Hero was much indebted to his Talents for "his immense elevation above his Fellows." Talents? you will say, what Talents? I answer. 1. An handsome Face. That this is a Talent, I can prove by the authority of a thousand Instances in all ages: and among the rest Madame Du Barry who said Le veritable Royaute est la Beaute. 2. A tall Stature, like the Hebrew Sovereign chosen because he was taller by the Head than the other Jews. 3 An elegant Form. 4. graceful Attitudes and Movement: 5. a large imposing Fortune consisting of a great landed Estate left him by his Father and Brother, besides a large Jointure with his Lady, and the Guardianship of the Heirs of the great Custis Estate, and in addition to all this, immense Tracts of Land of his own acquisition. There is nothing, except bloody Battles and Splendid Victories, to which Mankind bow down with more reverence than to great fortune. They think it impossible that rich Men especially immensely rich Men, Should Submit to the trouble of Serving them but from the most benevolent and disinterested Motives.... Such is

¹ John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1966), 95.

their Love of the Marvellous, and Such their Admiration of uncommon Generosity that they will believe extraordinary pretensions to it and the Pope Says, Si bonus Populus vult decipi, decipiatur. Washington however did not deceive them. I know not that they gave him more credit for disinterestedness, than he deserved, though they have not given many others so much. 6. Washington was a Virginian. This is equivalent to five Talents. Virginian Geese are all Swans. Not a Bearne in Scotland is more national, not a Lad upon the High Lands is more clannish, than every Virginian I have ever known. They trumpet one another with the most pompous and mendacious Panegyricks. The Phyladelphians and New Yorkers who are local and partial enough to themselves are meek and modest in Comparison with Virginian Old Dominionisms Washington of course was extolled without bounds. 7. Washington was preceded by favourable Anecdotes. The English had used him ill, in the Expedition of Braddock. They had not done Justice to his Bravery and good Council They had exaggerated and misrepresented his defeat and Capitulation: which interested the Pride as well as compassion of Americans in his favour. . . . 8 He possessed the Gift of Silence. This I esteem as one of the most precious Talents. 9. He had great Self Command. It cost him a great Exertion Sometimes, and a constant Constraint, but to preserve So much Equanimity as he did, required a great Capacity. 10. Whenever he lost his temper as he did Sometimes, either Love or fear in those about him induced them to conceal his Weakness from the World. Here you See I have made out ten Talents without saying a Word about Reading Thinking or writing, upon all which Subjects you have Said all that need be Said. - You See I Use the word Talents in a larger Sense than usual, comprehending every Advantage. Genius Experience, Learning, Fortune Birth, Health are all Talents, though I know not how, the Word has been lately confined to the faculties of the Mind.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and the excerpt or the full transcript and view the image of the letter. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions and engage in the suggested activity:

- 1. From your reading of the letter, how would you describe Adams—as an admirer of George Washington or jealous of Washington's reputation? Explain your response.
- 2. How does Adams explain his decision to omit reading, thinking, and writing in his list of Washington's talents?

Note: The teacher should arrange the following suggested activity.

- Students should be placed in small groups and randomly assigned two or three of the ten talents Adams listed in his letter to Benjamin Rush. There can be overlap of talents between groups.
- Students should discuss the talents they were assigned and then reword the phrasing and vocabulary so that each numbered talent will be understandable to peers.
- In a debriefing session, the groups will each receive copies of all the talents and then discuss their group findings. Students and the teacher will then determine acceptable "translations" and interpretations.
- Students should then revisit the first question above and write an argumentative paragraph supporting their response, using evidence from the prior classroom discussion.

Image

Luincy Advernber 11 1807 to their bart information me My dear Phylosopher and Friend the parties the must define I have long before the receipt of your Faurer of the 31 of Oclober Supposed that either you were gaking of the Comet or curring the Influenza; and in either case, that you was much better employed thean in answering my iche Letters. Pray! have our Astronomie at Pay Ladelphia observed that Stran ger in the Heavens! How they noted it Bearings and Vistames its Course and prograps whene it came and whither it goes? or and Astronomeno in A morice as save as they an in other Parts of the World? It ranks lin has Several times related to me an Aneed te concerning Astrono ment in England Growmant had accession to Tour an Astronomer abraal upon Jonne Service. The Ministry actual the Royal Jourty to recommend one they appointed a Committee to enquine for a Juitable Character. In ranka lin who was one of the 6 ommittee Jaist that he and all his followynes, upon looking over the List of the Society were astonisted to find here fere had ever studied that Science I are very much afraid that our Scientific Societies in America, and at least as deficient in Numbers fitudents of the Universe and the Jum of Things as England on Have our Physicians in Phyladelphia made any new observations on that herrid Endenical Distern per that has employed you to much. It Seems to have become a 6 - mplaint of every giver, and of two or three times in a year. This last has been the most universal and the most istabune and the most unmanagrade of any I wan honew. I presume the Langer whom you mentions has tounded his opinion upon that if Prache faccoult Mande wille Arobbe Machiavel and I had about Jail Frieties, that there is no Jush thing in Nature actual or popsible as a difinition. action, and that the Fritater musit home been non Compass when he Jupped tuch a Thing popsible Brother desays? Those and not Joand Those haste no Jush a Thing popsible Brother desays? But les, Hut hinson or even Thatte being might have taught the Traitle in Virtue! But ler, Hutchinson or ear. Thefteebury might have taget the Better. Ourhous you will day that God alone can judge what is or is not a

John Adams to Benjamin Rush, November 11, 1807, p. 1. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00424)

a disinterested action Though this is true is an absolute tinte yet ellen can judge according to their best information and discomment and if the Tastater made his Executive the judge, he must determine decording to his onen understanding and Construce. I I hould deprecate at Solerun Judyment of any Court, that Juck a Legacy was wait. Left laught or Book learned in the Arts our Hora was much in debles to his Talente for "his immense devation above his Fellows" Talents ! nove will Say what Idents ? I anower. I. An handsome Face, That this is a Talent, I can prove by the authinity of a thereband Instances in all ages ; and arrang the rest Madame Su Barrow who Said Le verstable Chayante est la Beaute. 2. A tall Station like the Hobron Toversign chosen because he was taller by the Head than the other I and 3 An elegant Form. h. graceful Attitudes and Movement: 5: a large imposing Fortune consisting of a great landel Estate left him by his Father and Brother, besides a large Joinsteine with his Lady, and the quardianship of the Heirs of the great Eustis Estate, and in addition to all this immune Frank of Land of his own acquisition There is nothing, except blood Battles and Iplendid Victories to which Marthind bow down with me recurrence than to great fortune They think it inspristle that rich then especially immerch rich Men, Swerkt Submit to the trouble of Serving them but from the most benedalent and discritecisted Motions, Manhind in general are to far from the opinion of the dawyer, that there are no disinterest actions, that they give this Esteen, to none but these which they believe to be Juch. They die oftener descived and strated in this Judgments of disinteerthal Min and articus than in any other, it is true. But Such is their dave of the Marcellows, that they will before and Such their admiration of uncommon General that they will believe correctioning genetications to it and the Pope Jougs Si bonus Populars welt decipie, decipienter, Washington however did not decive them. I know not that they though they have not given many others I much decive them. I know not that they took him more credit for disinterested up, them he descreed 6. Hashington was a Tixquirian. This is equivalent to five Telent. Pirquirian Gerse are all Iwans. Not a Bearne in Settland is more notional, not a Lad upon the High I ands is more clannish them every Virginian I have wer known. They trumpet one another with the most perspons and mendacious Panagyrichs. The Phyladel phiand and New yorkness who are local and partial enough to themselves merte and modert in Companison with firstinian Old Dominionifm

John Adams to Benjamin Rush, November 11, 1807, p. 2. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00424)

7. Washington was preceded by forourable Anerdotes. The Suglish had used him ill in the Sepectition of Breaddack. They had not done Tustice to his Braving and good four il They had exagginated and misrepresented his defeat and Capitulation which interested the Prile had exagginated and misrepresented his defeat and Capitulation which interested the Prile as well as composition of Americans in his factor. President Casis had draw, his Horroscope by celling tim that Horrie youth Gol Washington Mr Lynch of South Carolina told me before we met in Congress in 1974 that " Colon I " Washington had made the most closumt Speak that ever had been Spothen " when the Eintroders, with England, viz That if the English Should attach the " People of Boston, he would raise a thousand atten at his non sepance and march at their head to New England to their Ded." Several other favourable Mories proceeded ties appearance in Congress and in the army & H. profo ford the gift of Silence. This I esteem as one of the most presidents Talente 9. He had great Silf & orrem and It cast him a great territion dome times, and a constant & outraind , but to preserve to much Equanimity as he did required a great Eapacity. 10 Whenever The but his temper as he did Sometimis, either down or fear in thep about him induced them to concert his Weaking frim the world. Here 3 an Sae I have made out ten Falent without In in a word about Realing Thinking or writing, upon all which Subjects is on have Said all that need be Jail. - you See I life the word Talent in a larger Suise than usual compachanting way advantaged Genices Dependences Learning, Fortune Birthy are all Talent, though I know not have, the word has been lately can find to the facelters of the Mind Did not Rabiliff Give a Library to the University of orford? - He had with at will. Riding one day by a brick building he Saw the Scoffolding give way under a Mason who was laing the so Bricks and which which had been laid follow ity the Scaffell, build the Workman and crushed him to death Or ateliff eried out before the Man or the Breichs had realed the Ground "BEford are the dead who die in the Lord for they cease from their Labours, and their Works Shall follow them, a thersand other Stories are tall of his with whether he read or 3 not he officed to be a perfound Metaphisician. I read in England, at Mortfilling Popallo & Coplian in Manuscript, a Demenstration of Athism written by this Dr Ratelff, as abstrate and profound as the Whitings of Genderest. The write of least Seemed to think it profound, or to might that others might think it to : but it was a miserable Piece of Jophistry, worthy of Didnot. a mis crate the Subject of your intended Lecture Alton goes of our Universalist Murray. It is sais that must them twent grans ago he preached when the Subject of Animalo in a future Facte and afforted that they would all be Savid, even deven to

John Adams to Benjamin Rush, November 11, 1807, p. 3. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00424)

the Ladis Landoys, He till the Valie they need not fear the lops of their favourite and male, for he could afour that even Bounce Should way his Jail in glory ... Some told Murray the story and ached him if it was true? Athe Said Murray you will hear a thousand buch stories about me Pray cannot you centrive to get the Grees and Cant into a Bestime State too! I that like to think that grows and Herristo Apple Pearl Plast and Plan & hers evanged the might be Jeen in the about of the blipsed. The East of Thelbourne's Bishop Watson, while he was a Thymist which I wish he had been to this day printed a very respectable Pamphlet, to then that Texita bles were animated. He did not publish if but I male interest mough with him to become rational and immertal. There is room en negh in the mission Horshell digs up Marsin the heavens, first Stars, all Juns with Planeth Sotelites and Court, tay or ofter layer and Stration sender Stration, ten millin trives faster and more numerous than may then dig Potataes out of the Scenth Why Sheald she Set limits then to our benesdence or the predeminant benesdence in the Unidente. Let Sensibility accimution, Intelligence Virtue and Happineps be universal; with all my heart. Think not that I am laughing, I afence you I Jobert approve your Jubjut and your manour of treating it, as her as you have communicated it is me Now for that resolute word "No" - - . Sought to have Said No to the appointment of Washing ton, and Hamilton and Jome others: and yes to the appointment of Burr Muhlen barry and Some others. I ought to have apprented Lincols and gets and thenox and Elisten de But if I had Said zis and No in this mannes the Lewste would have centradiated me in every hertance. you ask what overell have been the Consequence I answer Wathington would have been chosen President at the next election, if he had tived and Hamilton would have been appointed of the next election, if he had tived and Hamilton would have been appointed to momander in This of the Army. This would have happened as it was if wash Gormander in O this was intended. With all my Ministers against me a great ingten had lived and this was intended. With all my Ministers against me a great Majority of the Sundle, and of the Hout of Representations, I was no more at Liberty then a Man in a Prison, chained to the flow and bound trand and Foot an idee that was one held up by a Parson Beerr of Worcester an anceter of Aaron an save not was once need up of herman Siberty. I was perfectly of discription as I Jupply as an illustration of herman Siberty. I was perfectly of discription there. I have given you Paradoes enough under this Word No. But I will justify any of them if your desire it. Washing for ought either to have never your out of Public Life, or he ought never to how some in again, I have a great Eurissity to homen what Richard Jaw and heard at Richard of while it is not lawfull to till Jymptoms of a formultion affarming to the Friends of drawh Course and their usual termin atein We are they officer Alen John Adams to Benjamin D. 1.

John Adams to Benjamin Rush, November 11, 1807, p. 4. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00424)

Transcript

Quincy November 11 1807

My dear Phylosopher and Friend

I have, long before the receipt of your favour of the 31 of October, Supposed that either you were gazing at the Comet or curing the Influenza: and in either case, that you was much better employed than in answering my idle Letters. Pray! have our Astronomers at Phyladelphia, observed that Stranger in the Heavens? Have they noted its Bearings and Distances, its Course and progress? Whence it came and whither it goes? Or are Astronomers in America as rare as they are in other Parts of the World? Franklin has Several times related to me an Anecdote concerning Astronomers in England. Government had occasion to Send an Astronomer abroad upon Some Service. The Ministry asked the Royal Society to recommend one: they appointed a Committee to enquire for a Suitable Character. Franklin who was one of the Committee, Said that he and all his Colleagues, upon looking over the List of the Society were astonished to find how few had ever Studied that Science. I am very much afraid that our Scientific Societies in America are at least as deficient in Numbers of Students of the Universe and the Sum of Things as England. -- Have our Physicians in Phyladelphia made any new observations on that horrid Endemical Distemper that has employed you so much. It Seems to have become, a Complaint of every year, and of two or three times in a year. This last has been the most universal and the most irksome and the most unmanageable of any I ever knew.

I presume the Lawyer whom you mention has founded his opinion upon that of Rochefaucault, Mandeville Hobbs Machiavel, and I had almost Said Tacitus, that there is no such thing in Nature, actual or possible as a disinterested Action, and that the Testator must have been non Compos, when he Supposed Such a Thing possible. Brother Lawyer! thou art not Sound. Thou hast no Faith in Virtue! Butler, Hutchinson or even Shaftesbury might have taught thee Better. Perhaps you will Say that God alone can judge, what is or is not a disinterested action. Though this is true in an absolute Sense, yet Men can judge according to their best information and discernment, and if the Testator made his Executor the judge, he must determine according to his own understanding and Conscience. I Should deprecate a Solemn Judgment of any Court, that Such a Legacy was void.

Self taught or Book learned in the Arts, our Hero was much indebted to his Talents for "his immense elevation above his Fellows." Talents? you will Say, what Talents? I answer. 1. An handsome Face. That this is a Talent, I can prove by the authority of a thousand Instances in all ages: and among the rest Madame Du Barry who said Le veritable Royaute est la Beaute. 2. A tall Stature, like the Hebrew Sovereign chosen because he was taller by the Head than the other Jews. 3 An elegant Form. 4. graceful Attitudes and Movement: 5. a large imposing Fortune consisting of a great landed Estate left him by his Father and Brother, besides a large Jointure with his Lady, and the Guardianship of the Heirs of the great Custis Estate, and in addition to all this, immense Tracts of Land of his own acquisition. There is nothing, except bloody Battles and Splendid Victories, to which Mankind bow down with more reverence than to great fortune. They think it impossible that rich Men especially immensely rich Men, Should Submit to the trouble of Serving them but from the most benevolent and disinterested Motives. Mankind in general are so far from the opinion of the Lawyer, that there are no disinterested Actions, that they give their Esteem to none but those which they believe to be Such. They are oftener deceived and abused in their Judgments of disinterested Men and actions than in any other, it is true. But Such is their Love of the Marvellous, [struck: that they will believe] and Such their Admiration of uncommon Generosity that they will believe extraordinary pretensions to it and the Pope Says, Si bonus Populus vult decipi, decipiatur. Washington however did not deceive them. I know not that they gave him more credit for disinterestedness, than he deserved, *[inserted:* though they have not given many others so much.] 6. Washington was a Virginian. This is equivalent to five Talents. Virginian Geese are all Swans. Not a Bearne in Scotland is more national, not a Lad upon the High Lands is more clannish, than every Virginian I have ever known. They trumpet one another with the most pompous and mendacious Panegyricks. The Phyladelphians and New Yorkers who are local and partial enough to themselves are meek and modest in Comparison with Virginian Old Dominionisms Washington of course was extolled without bounds.

7. Washington was preceeded by favourable Anecdotes. The English had used him ill, in the Expedition of Braddock. They had not done Justice to his Bravery and good Council They had exaggerated and misrepresented his defeat and Capitulation: which interested the Pride as well as compassion of Americans in his favour. President Davis had drawn his Horroscope by calling

him "that Heroic youth, Col. Washington. Mr. Lynch of South Carolina told me before We met in Congress in 1774 that "Colonel Washington had made the most eloquent Speech that ever had been Spoken upon the Controversy with England, viz. That if the English Should attack the People of Boston, he would raise a thousand Men at his own expence and march at their head to New England to their Aid." Several other favourable Stories preceded his appearance in Congress and in the army. 8 He possessed the Gift of Silence. This I esteem as one of the most precious Talents. 9. He had great Self Command. It cost him a great Exertion Sometimes, and a constant Constraint, but to preserve So much Equanimity as he did, required a great Capacity. 10. Whenever he lost his temper as he did Sometimes, either Love or fear in those about him induced them to conceal his Weakness from the World. Here you See I have made out ten Talents without saying a Word about Reading Thinking or writing, upon all which Subjects you have Said all that need be Said. – You See I Use the word Talents in a larger Sense than usual, comprehending every Advantage. Genius Experience, Learning, Fortune Birth, [*inserted*: Health] are all Talents, though I know not how, the Word has been lately confined to the faculties of the Mind.

Did not Ratcliff Give a Library to the University of Oxford? – He had Wit at Will. Riding one day by a [*inserted*: new] brick building, he Saw the Scaffolding give way under a Mason who was laing [*struck*: the] [*strikeout*] Bricks and [*inserted*: the] work which had been laid following the Scaffold, buried the Workman and crushed him to death. Ratcliff cried out before the Man or the Bricks had reached the Ground "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord for they cease from their Labours, and their works Shall follow them. a thousand other Stories are told of his Wit. Whether he read or not he affected to be a profound Metaphisician. I read in England, at Mr William Vossals of Clapham, in Manuscript, a Demonstration of Atheism written by this D^r Ratcliff, as abstruse and profound as the Writings of Condorcet. The Writer at least Seemed to think it profound, or to wish that others might think it So: but it was a miserable Piece of Sophistry, worthy of Diderot.

I admire the Subject of your intended Lecture. A Story goes of our Universalist Murray. It is said that more than twenty years ago he preached upon the Subject of Animals in a future State and asserted that they would all be Saved, even down to the Ladis Lapdogs. He told the Ladies they need not fear the loss of their favourite animals, for he could assure them that even

Bounce Should wag his Tail in Glory." I once told Murray the Story and asked him if it was true? Ah, Said Murray you will hear a thousand Such Stories about me.

Pray cannot you contrive to get the Trees and Plants into a future State too? I should like to think that Groves and Forrests, Apple Peach Pear and Plumb trees oranges &c might be Seen in the abodes of the blessed. The Earl of Shelbourne's Bishop Watson, while he was a Chymist, which I wish he had been to this day printed a very respectable Pamphlet, to Shew that Vegetables were animated. He did not publish it, but I made interest enough with him to obtain a Copy of it. Who knows but Vegetables and Animals are all in a course to become rational and immortal. There is room enough in the universe. Hershell digs up Starrs in the heavens, fixed Starrs, all Suns with Planett Satilites and Comets, layer after layer and Stratum under Stratum, ten million times faster and more numerous than may Men dig Potatoes out of the Earth. Why should We Set limits then to our benevolence, or the predominant benevolence in the universe. Let Sensibility Animation, Intelligence Virtue and Happiness be universal; with all my heart. Think not that I am laughing. I assure you I soberly approve your Subject and your manner of treating it, as far as you have communicated it to me.

Now for that resolute word "No." – – – I ought to have Said No to the appointment of Washington, and Hamilton and Some others: and Yes to the appointment of Burr, Muhlenburg and Some others. I ought to have appointed Lincoln and Gates and Knox and Clinton &c But if I had said Yes and No in this manner, the Senate would have contradicted me in every Instance. You ask what would have been the Consequence. I answer Washington would have been chosen President at the next Election, if he had lived, and Hamilton would have been appointed Commander in Chief of the Army. This would have happened as it was, if Washington had lived and this was intended. With all my Ministers against me, a great Majority of the Senate, and of the House of Representatives, I was no more at Liberty than a Man in a Prison, chained to the floor and bound hand and foot, an Idea that was once held up by a Parson Burr of Worcester an Ancestor of Aaron as I Suppose, as an illustration of human Liberty. I was perfectly at Liberty to Stay there. I have given you Paradoxes enough under this Word No. But I will justify any of them if you desire it. Washington ought either to have never gone out of Public Life, or he ought never to have come in again.

I have a great Curiosity to know what Richard Saw and heard at Richmond which it is not

lawfull to tell. Symptoms of a Corruption, allarming to the Friends of rational Liberty appear in every Part of our Country. They will have their usual Causes and their usual termination. We are like other Men.

Dr. Rush

J. Adams