

John Adams describes George Washington's ten talents, 1807

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.

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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?

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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.

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Image

Quincy November 11 1807

My dear Philosopher 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 Philadelphia observed that Stranger in the Heavens! Have they noted its Bearings and Distances, its Course and progress! whene 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 Number of students of the Universe and the Sunn of Things as England. Have our Physicians in Philadelphia 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 insidious and the most unmanageable of any I ever knew.

I presume the Lawyer whom you mentions has founded his opinion upon that of Locke, Laucault, 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 Tributor must have been non Compos when he Supposed such a Thing possible. Brother Lawyer! thou art not so good. There exists no Truth in Virtue. Brutus, Hutchinson or even Shaftesbury might have taught thee Better. Perhaps you will say 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)

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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 véritable Prozac est la Beauté. 2. A tall Stature, like the Hebrews Sovereign chosen because he was taller by the Head than the other Sons. 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 bows 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 Lawyers, 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 Judgment of disinterested Men and Actions than in any other, it is true. But such is their Love of the Marvellous, 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, decipietur, Washington however did not deceive them. I know not that they gave him more credit for disinterestedness, than he deserved. 6. Washington was a Virginian. This is equivalent to five Talents. Virginian Geese are all Swans, Not a Bear 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 Panegyrics. The Phylaxians and New Yorkers who are local and partial enough to themselves are meek and modest in Comparison with Virginian Abolitionists. Washington of course was adulated without bounds.

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

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7. Washington was preceded by favourable Annals. The English had used him ill, in the Expedition of Broadhead. 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 the Compassion of Americans in his favour. President Davis had drawn his Horoscope 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, & he proposed 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 Dexterity 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 Talent 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.

Did not Dr Abeloff give a Library to the University of Oxford? - He had wit at will. Riding one day by a ^{new} Brick building, he saw the Scaffolding give way under a Mason who was laying the ~~or~~ Bricks and ^{the} ~~which~~ which had been laid fallen by the Scaffolding, buried the workman and crushed him to death. Dr Abeloff 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 Labour, and their Works shall follow them." a thousand other Stories are told of his wit. whether he read or not he afforded to be a profound Metaphysician. I read in England, at Mr Williams's Copy of G. Colman's, in Manuscript, a Demonstration of Atheism written by this Dr Abeloff, as abstruse and profound as the strings of Candeur. 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 Ministry. It is said that ~~some~~ ^{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

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the Lady's Lapdogs. He told the Ladies they need not fear the loss of their favourite animals, for he could assure them, that even Boucher should wag his Tail in glory. I have 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 better State too? I should like to think that Groves and Forests, Apple Orchard ~~Plant~~ and Plum trees arranged he might be seen in the abodes of the blessed. The Earl of Shelburne's Bishop Watson, while he was a Jesuit, which I wish he had been to this day printed a very respectable Pamphlet, to shew that ~~the~~ ~~best~~ were animated. He did not publish it, but I made interest enough with him to obtain a Copy of it. Who knows but ~~the~~ ~~best~~ and animals are all in a course to become rational and immortal. There is room enough on the Universe, ~~to~~ ~~hold~~ ~~up~~ ~~Stars~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~heaven's~~, fixed Stars, all kind with Planets, Satellites and Comets, layer after layer and Stratum under Stratum, ten million times faster and more numerous than any then dig Potatoes out of the Earth. Why should we submit them 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 solemnly 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, Muhlensberg 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, as I see that was once held up by a Parson Burr of Worcester an ancestor of Aaron Burr, as an illustration of human Liberty. I was perfectly at Liberty to stay here, 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 lawful to tell. Symptoms of a Corruption afflicting to the Friends of rational Liberty appear in every Part of our Country. They will have their usual Brash Course and their usual denunciations. We are like other Men

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

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Transcript

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