



INSIDE THE VAULT

John Adams on the “Ten Talents” of George Washington

with Dr. Lindsay Chervinsky

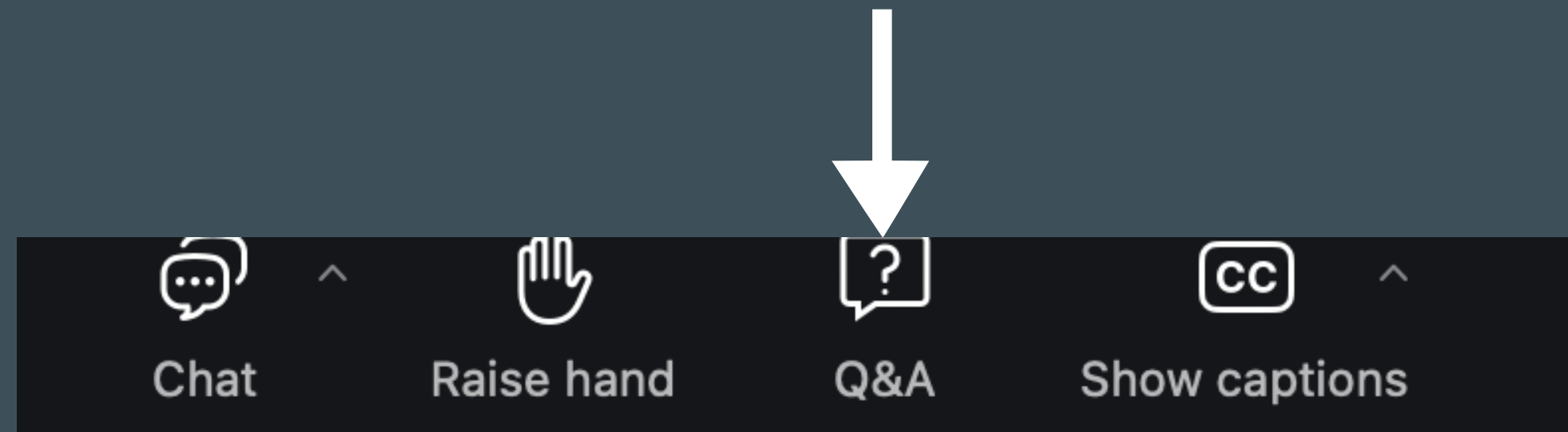
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2025

☆☆☆

THE
GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE
of
AMERICAN HISTORY

☆☆☆

How to Participate



- If you would like to ask a question, you can use the Q&A feature.
- We will be answering audience questions throughout the session.
- The views expressed here are those of the historian.

For Security and Privacy

- Your microphone is automatically muted.
- Your camera is automatically turned off.

Today's Document



The Lady's Lapdog. He told the Ladies they need not fear the loss of their fourpence and
male, for he could spare them, that even Boonice should say his Tail is
glory. I am 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 continue to get the Freed and Plant out a better State
too! I should like to think that you and your Friends might be able to
Plumb's tree orange he might be seen in the woods of the blessed. The
Earl of Shelburne's Bishop of Abson, while he was a Jesuit, which I wish he
had been to this day printed a very respectable Pamphlet, to show that Deists
had more animals. He did not publish it, but I made interest enough with him
to obtain a Copy of it. It has humors but not able and animals are all in a course
to become rational and immortal. There is room enough in the Universe, Northwell
to dig up Haron's field Stars, all sorts with Plumb's Satellites and
Comets; Layer after Layer and Stratum under Stratum, ten million times
farther and more numerous than any Man dig Potatoes out of the Earth.
Why should we set Limits, then to our benevolence or the predominant benevolence
in the Universe. Let humanity, animosity, 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, Mifflinburg and some others. I ought to have approved Lincoln and
Giles 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 really did
if you 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
with a Man that was one held up by a Person Burr of Worcester an Ancestor of Aaron
as I suppose, as an illustration of human Liberty. I was perfectly at Liberty to live,
I have given you Cause 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 Law and heard at Richmond
while it is not lawful to tell. Symptoms of a Corruption appearing to the Friends of
Washington, Liberty, appear in every Part of our Country. They will have their usual
usual course and their usual termination. We are the objects of their

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 Stran-
ger in the Heavens? How they noted its Bearings and Distances its
Course and progress? when it came and whether it goes? or are
Astronomers in America as rare as they are in other Parts of the world?
Franklin had several times related to me an Anecdote concerning Astron-
omers 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
Sum of Things as England, or 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 infectious and the most unmanageable of
any I ever knew.

I presume the Lawyer whom you mention has founded his opinion
upon that of Archbishop Mandeville's Noble Machiavel and I had almost
said Tacitus, that there is no such thing in Nature, actual or possible as a perfect
Action, and that the Justice must have been your Congress when he supposed
such a Thing possible. Another Lawyer! There are not so many. There had no
such in Nature. But Mr. Robinson or even Shaftesbury might have taught this
Better. Perhaps you will say that God alone can judge, what is or is not a
Better.

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 Judge made his
decree the judge he must determine according to his own understanding and
Conscience. I should deprecate a solemn Judgment of any Court, that such a
degar was said.

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 de Barry
who said Le véritable Croisant 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 Justice
consisting of a good Land Estate left him by his Father and Brother, besides
a long Fortune with his Lady, and the Guardianship of the Heirs of the great
Lords Estate, and in addition to all this, immense Tracts of Land of his own acquisition,
Then is nothing, except blood, battles and splendid Victories to which Man-kind 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 despicable and disinterested Motives, Man-kind 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 often deceived and absurd in their
Judgment of disinterested Men and Actions than in any other, it is true. But such is their
Love of the Marrow, that they will believe and see their admiration of unassuming Generosity
that they will believe extraordinary pretensions to it and the Pope says Li bonus Populus
nulli desipit, desipitque. Washington however did not deceive them. I know not that they
thought they have not given many others so much. Washington was a
man who was death for disinterestedness, than he deserved. Washington was a
Virginian. This is equivalent to five Talents. Virginian Great are all Islands, Not
a Better intellect is more national, not a Lad upon the High Lands is
more eloquent than every Virginian. I have ever known. They trumpet one
another with the most pompous and mendacious Panegyrics. The Physicist
physians and their Masters who are local and partial in ought to themselves
are much and modest in Comparison with Virginian All Dominion
Washington of course was added without bounds.

7. Washington was prevailed 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 placed the Bricks
as well as our Officers of Americans in his favour. President Adams had drawn
his Horoscope by calling him that Horric youth, Col. Washington. Mr. Lynch of
South Carolina told me before we went in Congress in 1774 that "Colonel
Washington had made the most elegant 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 expense and march
at their head to New England to their Aid." Several other favourable Notices
preceded his appearance in Congress and in the Army. 8. The professed Gift
of Silence. This I esteem as one of the most precious Talents. 9. He had great
Self Government. It cost him a great portion of his time, and a constant Constraint, but
to preserve so much Equanimity as he did, required a great Capacity. 10. Whenever
he let 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 stopping a word about Reading
Thinking or writing upon all which Subjects you have said all that need be
said - you see I like the word Talents in a large Sense than usual, comprehending
every advantage Genius requires, Learning, Justice, Birth, are all Talents, though
I have not here, the word has been lately confined to the faculties of the Mind.

Did not Ashbliff give a Library to the University of Oxford? - He had not
at Will. Ashbliff one day by a brick building, he saw the scaffolding give way
under a Mason who was laying the Bricks and which which had been laid upon
the scaffolding, behind the workman and crushed him to death. Ashbliff cried out
before the Man or the Bricks had reached the ground. "Blasphemy 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 rich. Whether he read or
not he offered to be a profound Metaphysician. I read in England, at Mr. Williams
Topsall's of a Capt. in Manuscript, a Demonstration of Atheism written by
him. So Ashbliff, as obscure and profound as the writings of Condorcet. The writer of
last 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 Uninstructed Murray
it is said that some thirty years ago he preached upon the subject of Animals
in a future State and asserted that they would all be saved, even devils to

John Adams's letter to Benjamin Rush, November 11, 1807.
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00424)

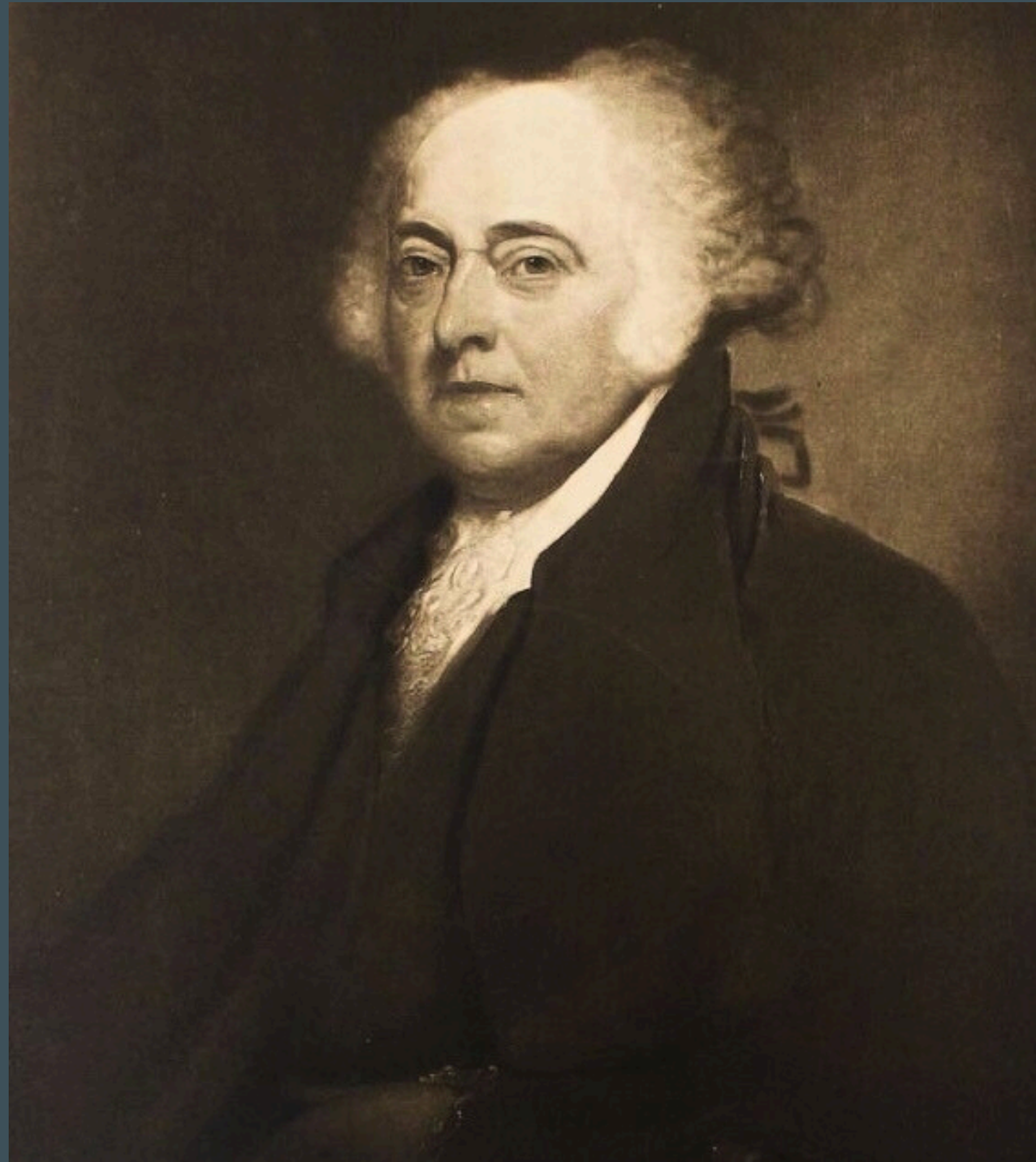
Dr. Lindsay Chervinsky



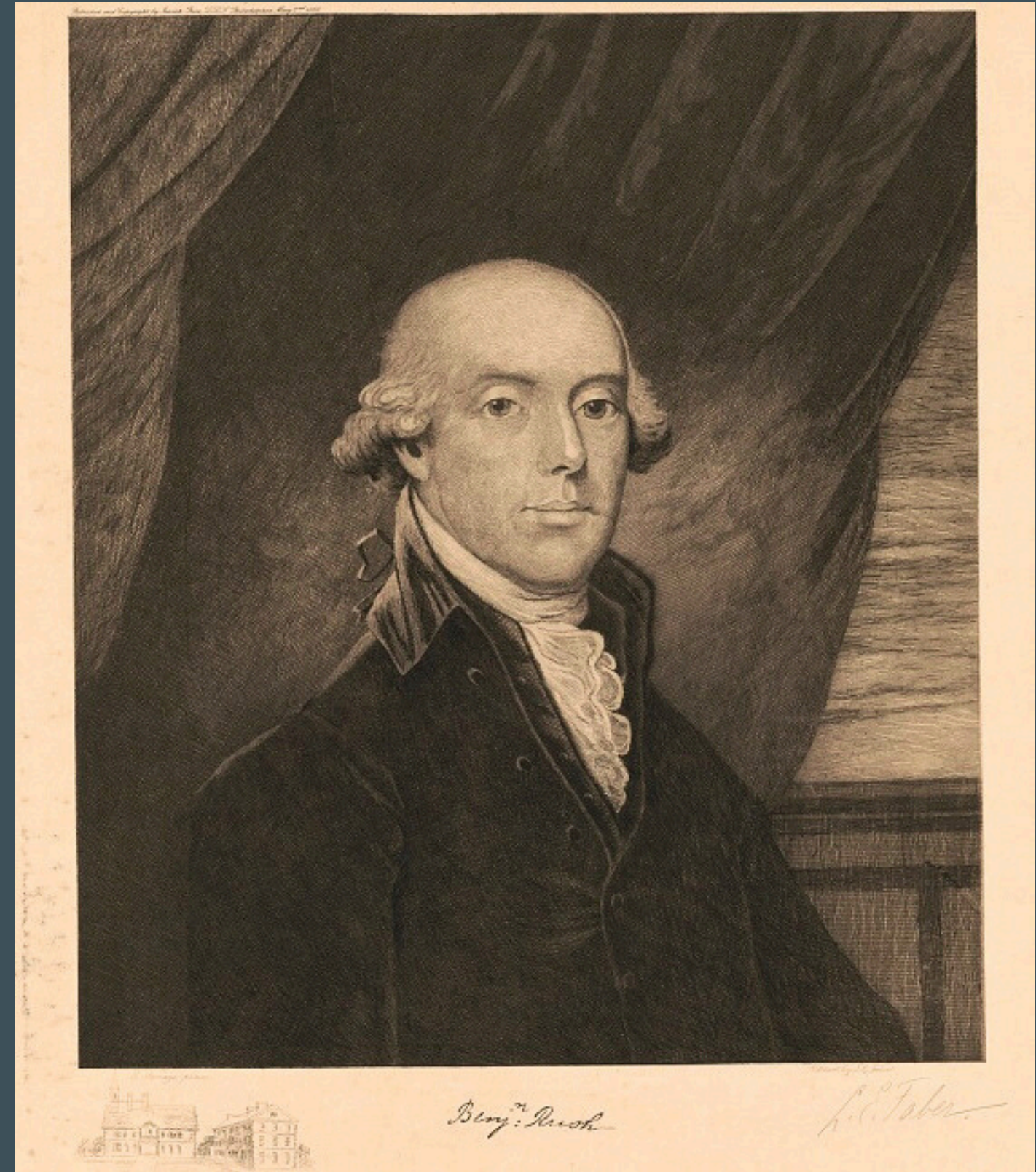
Dr. Lindsay Chervinsky is a distinguished historian specializing in the US presidency, politics, and government. She currently serves as the executive director of the George Washington Library at Mount Vernon. Dr. Chervinsky is the author of the award-winning book *The Cabinet: George Washington and the Creation of an American Institution*. Her work can be found everywhere from feature articles in *The Washington Post* to appearances on popular podcasts like *Listening to America*.



John Adams and Benjamin Rush

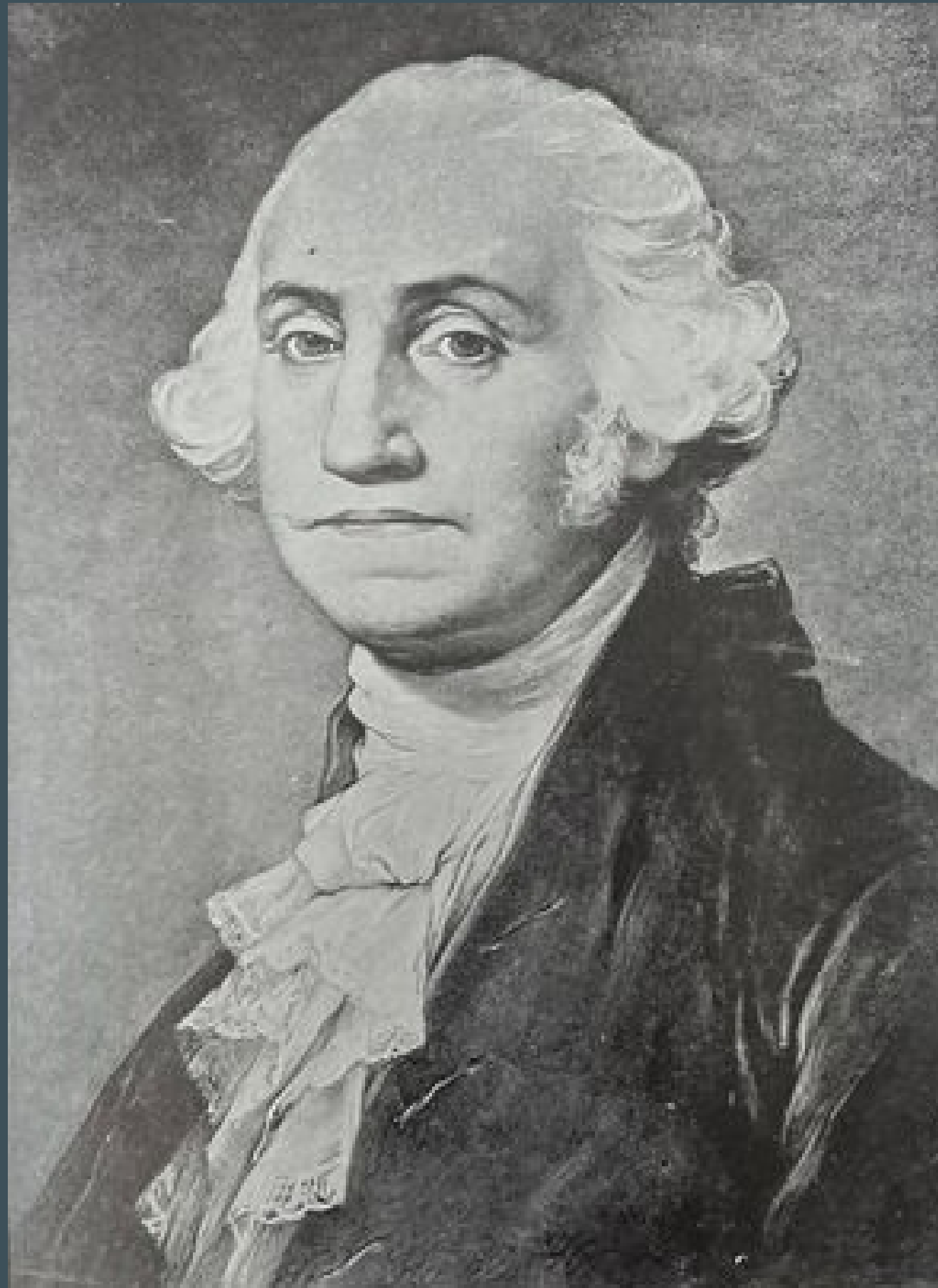


Engraving of John Adams, circa 1910.
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08878.1979)



Photograph of an engraving of Benjamin Rush, circa 1898.
(Library of Congress)

George Washington's Ten Talents



“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 DuBarry who said *Le veritable Royaume est la Beauté.*”

Engraving of George Washington, circa 1860.
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08878.1326)

George Washington's Ten Talents

“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 Movements.”

Engraving of George Washington, circa 1860.
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08878.1322)



George Washington's Ten Talents



“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.”



Lithograph done by Thomas Doughty and Hugh Reinagle of Mount Vernon, 1832.
(Library of Congress)



The Washington family—George Washington, his lady, and her two grandchildren by the name of Custis, engraved by Edward Savage, Philadelphia, March 10, 1798. (Library of Congress)

George Washington's Ten Talents



“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 Dominionism. Washington of course was extolled without bounds.”

Engraving of George Washington, 1863.
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08878.1305)

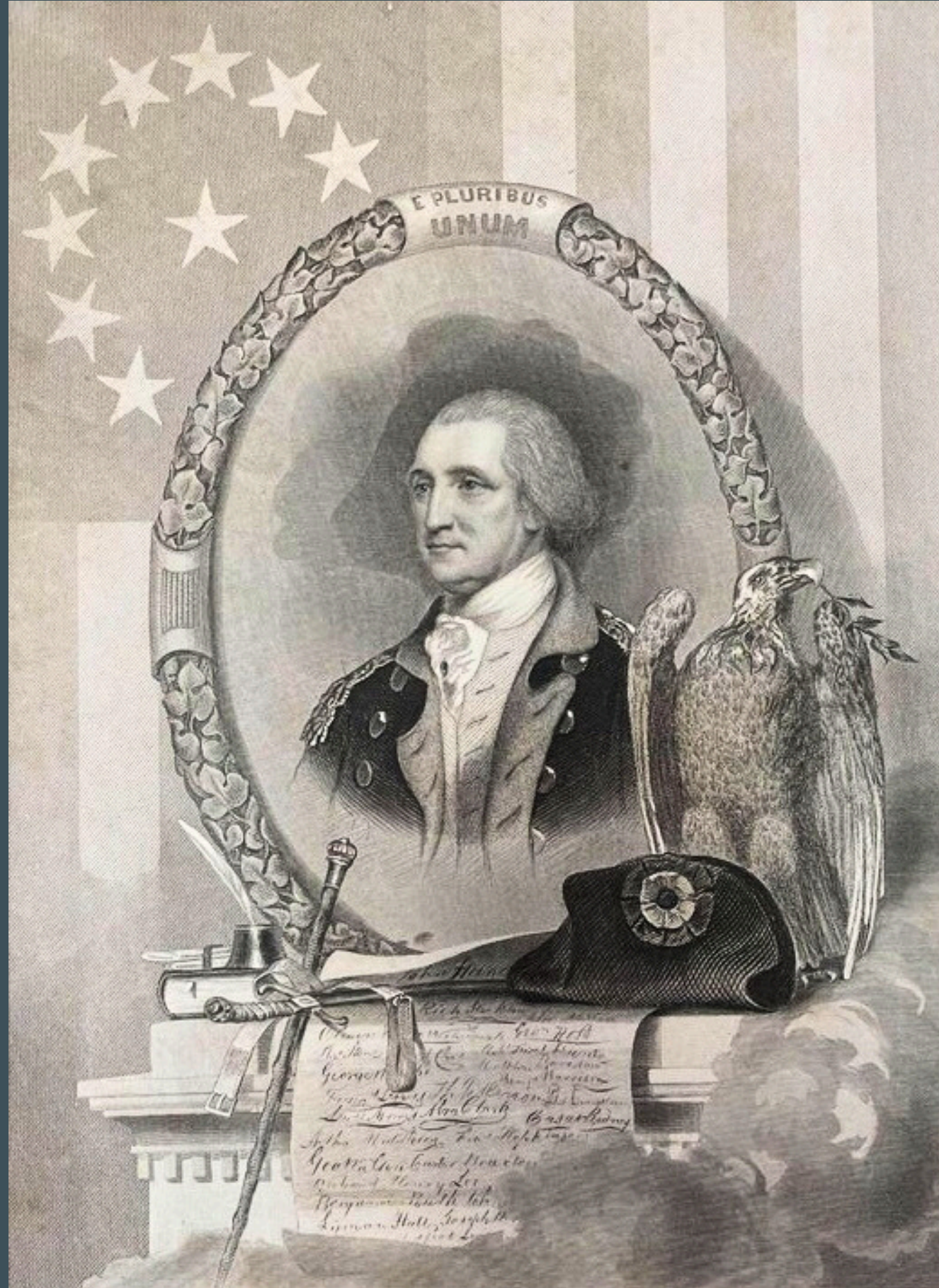
George Washington's Ten Talents

“7.... 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.”

Engraving of George Washington, circa 1860.
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC 08878.1321)



George Washington's Ten Talents



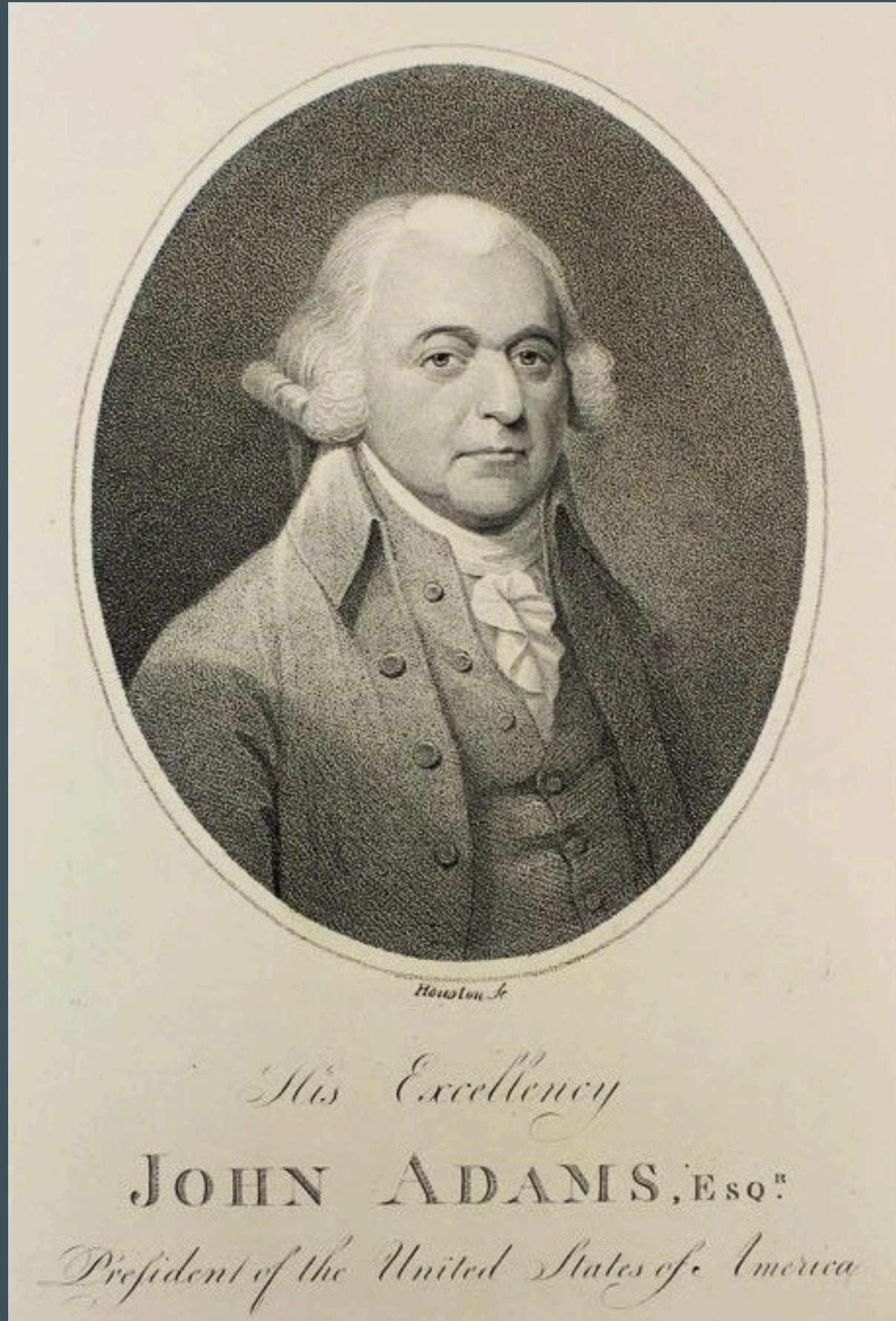
“8. He possessed the Gift of Silence. This I esteem as one of the most precious Talents.

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.”

Engraving of George Washington by Alonzo Chappel, circa 1860.
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08878.1306)

George Washington's Ten Talents



“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

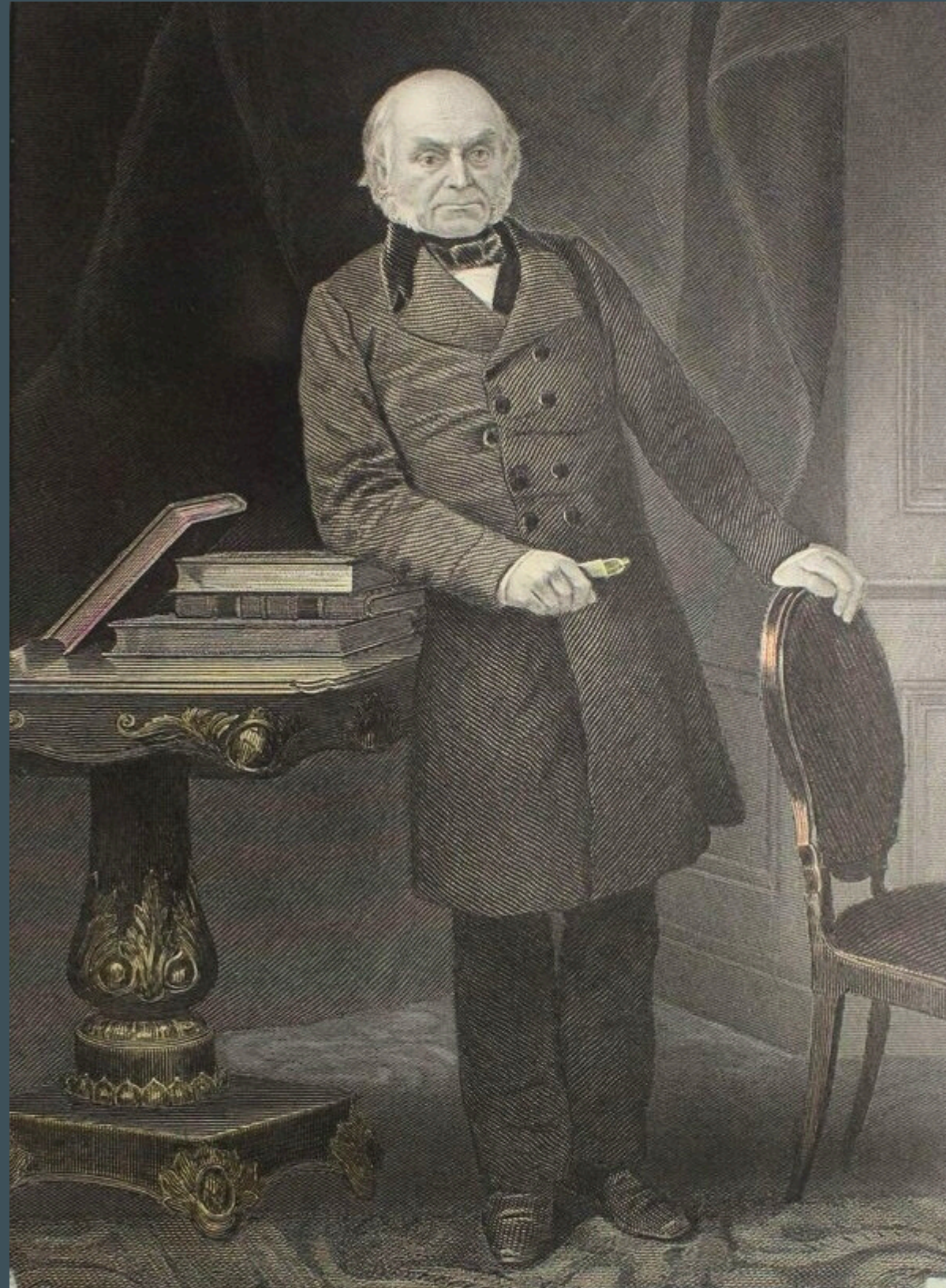
You See I Use the Word Talents in a larger sense than usual, comprehending every Advantage. Genius Experience, Learning, Fortune Birth, Health are all Talents, though I know not how, the Word has been lately confined to the faculties of the Mind.”

Engraving of John Adams, circa 1820.
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08878.1978)

Adams's Philosophy



“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.”

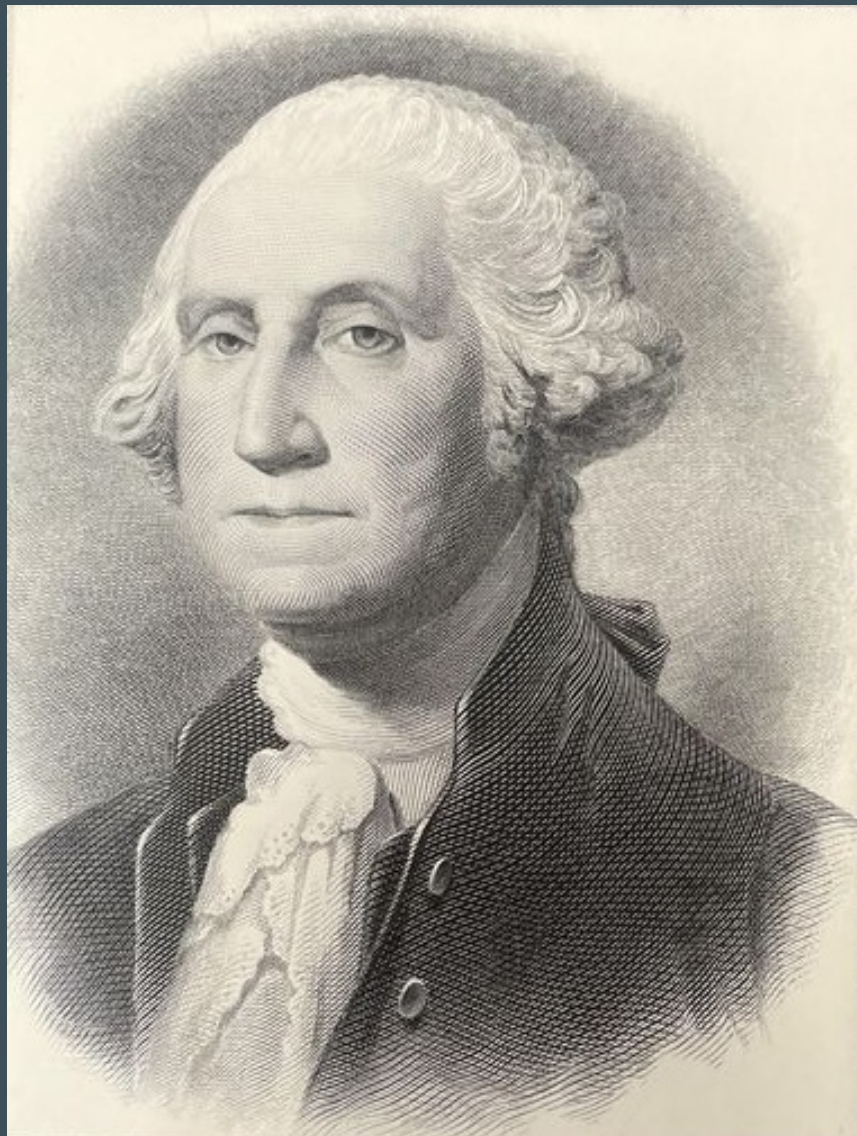


Engraving of John Quincy Adams, circa 1840.
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08878.2037)

“Earl of Shelbourne’s Bishop Watson . . . printed a very respectable Pamphlet, to shew that Vegetables were animated. Who knows but Vegetables and Animals are all in a course to become rational and immortal. There is room enough in the Universe.”

In Washington's Shadow

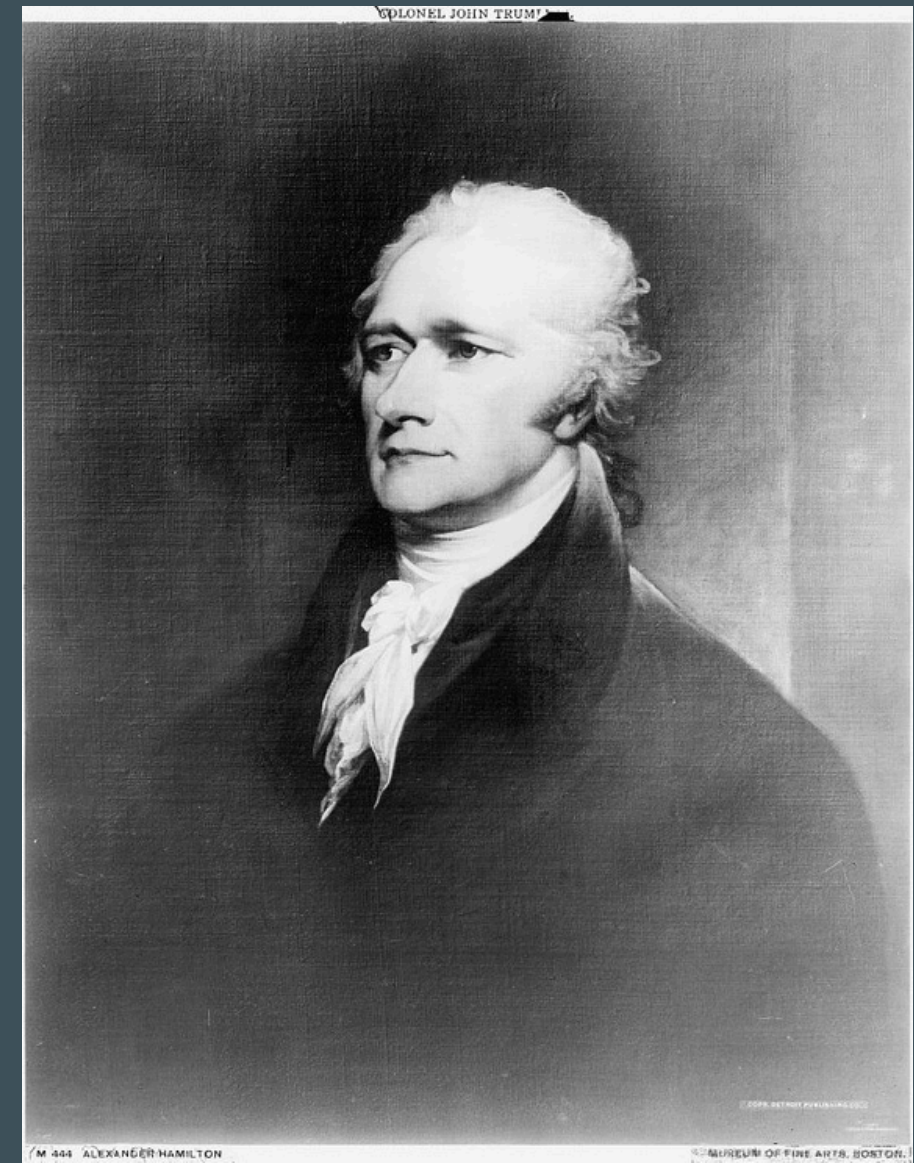
“Now for that resolute Word. ‘No.’ . . . I ought to have said No to the Appointment of Washington, and Hamilton and some others: and yes to the appointment of Burr, Muhlenburg and some others. . . . But if I had said Yes and No in this manner the Senate would have contradicted me in every Instance.”



Engraving of George Washington, circa 1805.
(Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08878.1302)

“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.”

Engraving of Alexander Hamilton,
Detroit Publishing Co., 1900–1912.
(Library of Congress)



“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 Unstable Political Landscape

“Washington ought either to have never gone out of Public Life, or he ought never to have come in again.”



Washington delivering his first inaugural address in the Old City Hall in New York, 1849.
(Library of Congress)

Upcoming Free Programs

INSIDE THE VAULT:

- **March 6** at 7 p.m. ET (4 p.m. PT): We will discuss Eureka Village with Dr. Allison Rose Jefferson.
- **April 3** at 7 p.m. ET (4 p.m. PT): As we near the 250th anniversary of Lexington and Concord, we will discuss the battles with Dr. Brooke Barbier.

BOOK BREAKS: February 9 at 2 p.m. ET (11 a.m. PT)

- Dr. Johnathan W. White will discuss his book *A Great and Good Man: Rare, First-Hand Accounts of Abraham Lincoln*