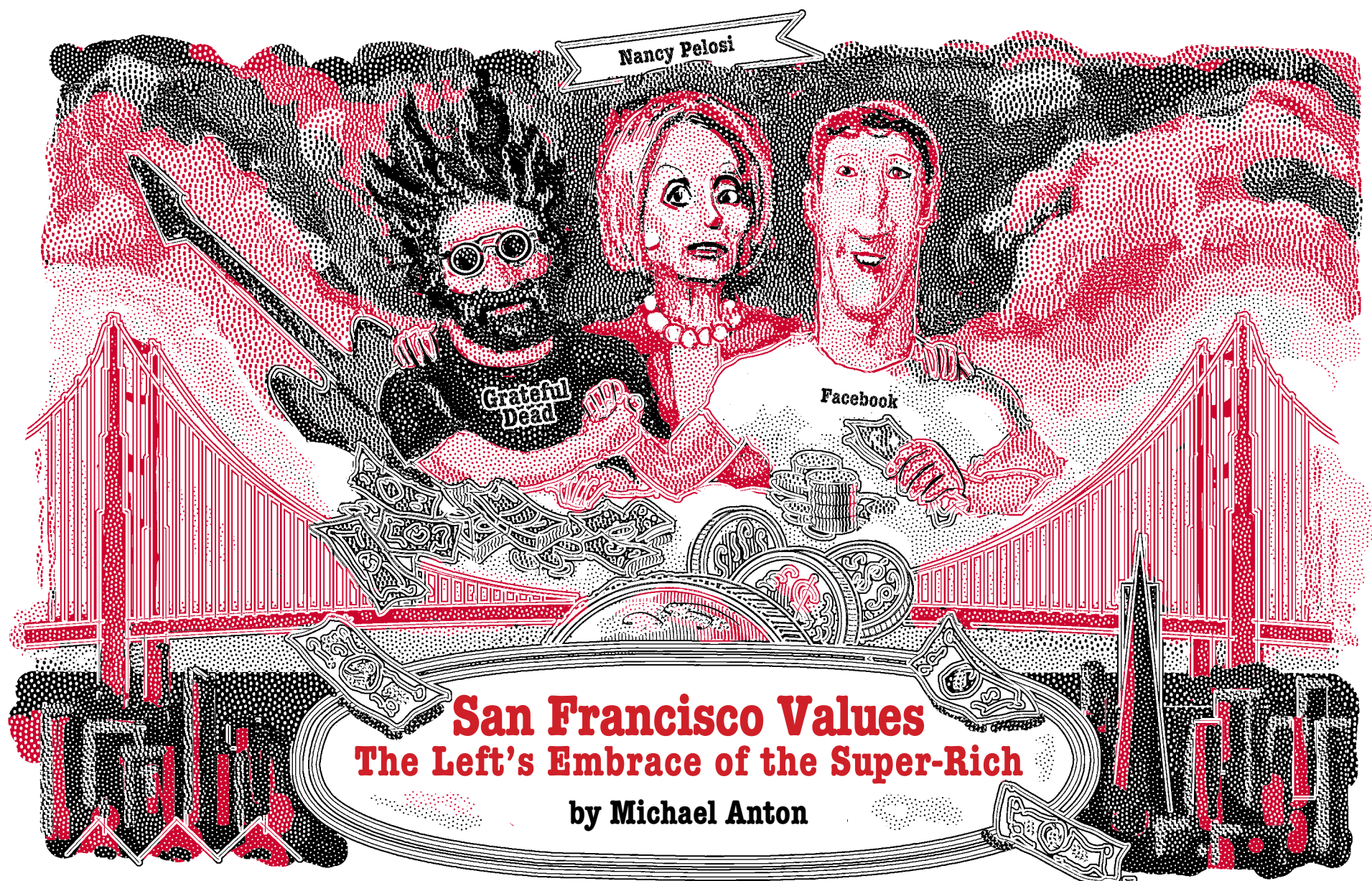


VOLUME XV, NUMBER 4, FALL 2015

# CLAREMONT

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



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Christopher Flannery:  
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RIP**



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Book Review by Robert K. Faulkner

## THE FIRST AMERICAN

*Washington's Revolution: The Making of America's First Leader*, by Robert Middlekauff.  
Alfred A. Knopf, 384 pages, \$30



**T**HIS IS A QUIETLY AUTHORITATIVE book that establishes a quite radical thesis. And it has good maps.

Robert Middlekauff concentrates on the well-worn topic of George Washington as general of the Americans during the Revolutionary War. But his briskly judicious history sheds new light. Middlekauff's Washington is more than the ingenious military commander who contrives with sketchy forces to throw off the imperial master. This Washington is formative for the revolutionaries themselves. He is the defining embodiment of their enlightened cause amidst the divisions and doubts at home. *Washington's Revolution* is then theme as well as title: the great man in effect shaped the Revolution. The direction and limits of his generalship were in good part self-imposed. His "thought...amounted to a form of constitutionalism." Middlekauff's engagingly inquiring narrative of particulars can reward scholars as well as a broader audience, even if, at the end, it becomes a bit fuzzy as to just what Washington was fighting for.

Robert Middlekauff is emeritus professor at Berkeley and a former director of the Huntington Library. He is that singular type, a historian distinguished in his profession who seems free of both historicist reductionism and post-modern guilt and cynicism. His full-fledged scholarly history of the Revolution pronounced it *The Glorious Cause* (1982), expressly shunning irony. *Benjamin Franklin and His Enemies* (1996) disdained the fashionable distaste for Franklin as but effusions of a "period of slack," that is, of an era that "celebrates the liberated spirit—and flesh—not the disciplined mind." Now Middlekauff shows the very disciplined Washington to be greater than we knew.

**T**HIS BOOK OF HISTORY IS A LESSON in politics. Middlekauff explores "the making of a leader" while following Washington's development from Virginian, to American, to "Citizen of the World." His is not "contextual" history, occupied with external influences, for Washington was of "enormous importance" to the Revolution's course and outcome. In arguing this thesis Middle-

kauff draws profitably from original letters and documents. He is not preoccupied with other scholars (more confrontations would be useful), he disdains big theories of historical causation, and he acknowledges Washington's occasional errors. The result is a stream of sensible, digested, and intellectually lively judgments. Some biographers would pump up human interest in a marble statue by tales of loves, riches, and hunger for land. Middlekauff touches such affairs easily enough, but he, like Washington, concentrates on the grander aims and accomplishments. He brings out Washington's actual great motions. No statue, this. There is drama enough in a seminal revolutionary who is a partisan of enlightenment, victor over the world's greatest empire, and gentleman-general who infused his fierceness with fairness and honor. We see resolve, audacity, and dedication, yes, but husbanded shrewdly and without despotic purges, terror, or dictatorship of the righteous or of the leader himself.

Washington arose amidst the lesser Virginia tobacco-growing gentry and had to make his way, although eventually much fa-

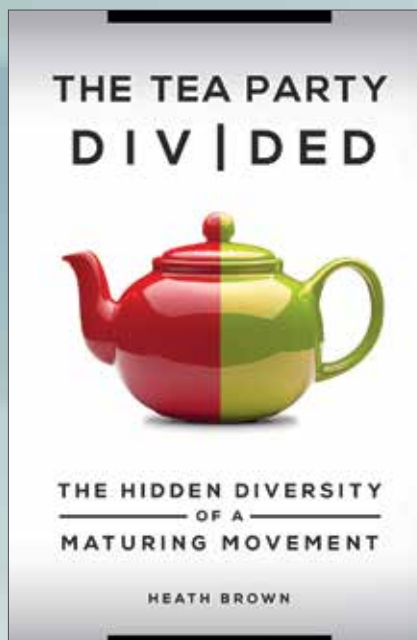


vored by relatives, friends, and marriage. One sees seeds of the resolute general and army-builder in the spirited young Virginia officer and then the enterprising expander of a run-down plantation. Washington had become the leading soldier of Virginia; he gained experience (and made mistakes) while confronting French and Indians to the West before turning, at age 22, in some disgust, from soldiering to running a plantation. The early efforts were accompanied by frequent quarrels with his superiors, both colonial governors and imperial generals. Washington insisted on what his tasks required, although adequate men and supplies were rarely forthcoming. He insisted, too, on what was due his officers and himself, including rank and pay equivalent to offices of the empire. That, too, was not forthcoming. He had finally quit in order to take up a life of private independence. Should one criticize him for "ambition for the status that appointment in the British army would bring, and occasionally an impatience," as Middlekauff does once? Or does that miss the magnanimous pride that Middlekauff usually discerns? Washington's pride was an unbending determination to be genuinely superior, that is, to be honorable in action, deserving of his honors, aware of his worth, and fearless in claiming what his accomplishments and his worth deserved. Although he reentered military duty within a year when General Edward Braddock arrived with a newly energized British force, it was on his own terms, as gentleman volunteer and advisor without pay. If he soon reaccepted command, it was of all Virginia's forces. Washington's proud independence upheld what he thought right against all comers, including conventional superiors, until, perhaps the colonies' foremost soldier at 27, he returned again to private life.

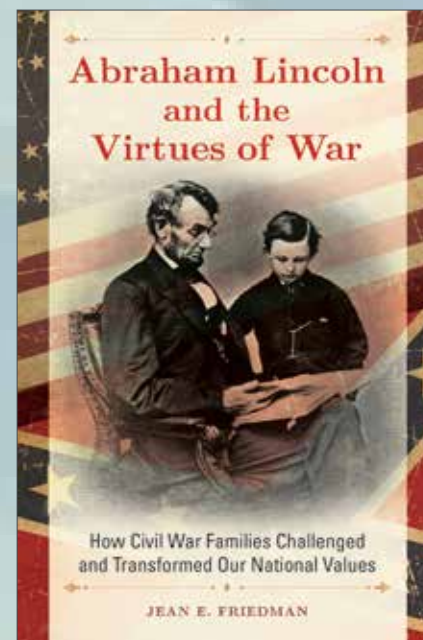
**A**S A PLANTER, WASHINGTON RESTORED Mount Vernon, administered his new wife's distant plantations, and aggressively enlarged his lands. Middlekauff brings out the remarkable "powers of organization" in private life that foreshadowed the revampings of a ramshackle Revolutionary army. He brings out, too, Washington's intensely scientific brand of agriculture. He systematically experimented with combinations of soils, composts, seeds, and plants, in order to decide what the home plantation should grow. Accordingly, he was early and unusual in replacing tobacco with wheat. An indefatigable correspondent, he spread his findings among friends and neighbors. The warrior and planter led in applying natural science as well as civil science.



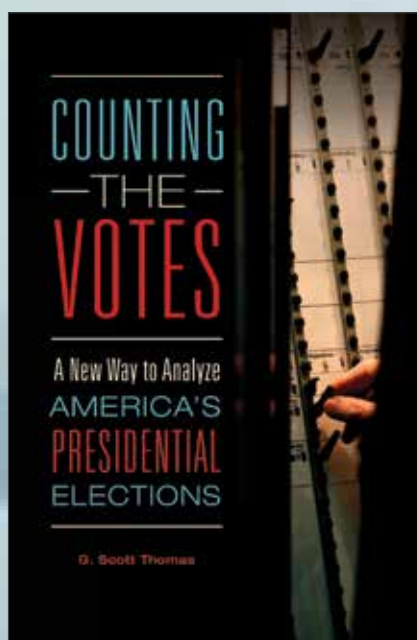
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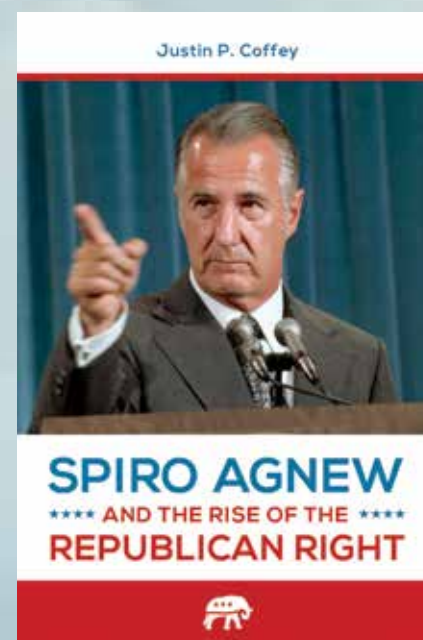
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That such a spirited, rich gentleman should step forward early in the revolutionary crisis, despite being “a patriarch” in “a patriarchal society” and dependent on British brokers, comes as no surprise in Middlekauff’s telling. Washington repeatedly clashed with the brokers, and he immediately suspected the new revenue taxes as but parts of a political plot. The oppression of Boston after the Tea Party confirmed his suspicions. He saw and felt that the right of Americans to govern themselves was at stake. Washington helped draft non-importation agreements, voted for various protests, helped draw up the Fairfax Resolves, which insisted on popular government by laws through consent of representatives, and served in the first and second Continental Congresses. In the second, after first appearing in civilian dress, and being much recognized for his prowess and wealth, he then appeared in military uniform. To refuse to be commander of the Revolutionary army, he wrote his wife, “would have reflected dishonor upon myself” and “given pain to my friends.”

MIDDLEKAUFF’S THEME AMIDST THE instructive particulars is the dependence of both army and political support upon Washington’s forceful shaping. Some trace the Revolution’s success to democratic spirit. But when Washington joined the army around Boston in 1775 he found the militias “nasty, dirty, and disobedient,” completely dependent on the diverse states, and subject to short and variable enlistments. Throughout the war he saw his army as composed of “comers and goers.” He had constantly to locate replacements—to beg Congress and the states for soldiers and for the pay, clothing, and provisions that might get men to join and then to remain. It is true, of course, that an officer corps helped sustain the Revolution. But Washington shaped that corps. He found in Boston a “rag-tag” group of officers, some elected by the soldiers, many appointed by the states, and most subject to the envy and suspicion of democratic legislatures. More than 50 officers were court-martialed in his first five months as commander. What Washington sought was a separate “caste” of officers, a class treated and paid like “gentlemen” of honor. He pressed the states and Congress for such pay and treatment, then pressed for back pay, and then, with little forthcoming, pressed for at least some pay when the army was dissolved. This too was not forthcoming. At Valley Forge, in winter 1777-78, 200 to 300 officers had resigned, and the army as a

whole came close to “catastrophic collapse.” In 1781 the Pennsylvania Line mutinied and, with their (reasonable) demands, marched on Congress. In 1783 there was projected a much more dangerous mutiny of the officer corps generally, also to march on Congress. It was Washington alone whose Newburgh Address turned the officers around. The meaning of the Revolution was at stake, together with “the rights of humanity,” “your own sacred honor,” and “the National character of America.”

In effect, more or less, Washington became the country’s decisive government as well as the army’s soul. Apart from the army, Middlekauff notes, there was hardly a country. There was neither one society nor real government: hardly a national capital, no executive, no supreme court, and no supreme legislature. The Continental Congress was the divided representatives of the separate states. The states themselves were commonly stingy and erratic in anteing up men, pay, and provisions for the common cause. The states varied in loyalty with the armies’ progress or retreat. It was the fierce little Christmastime

### Washington’s pride was an unbending determination to be honorable.

victories at Trenton and Princeton (1776-77) that encouraged New Jersey to switch back from loyalist to revolutionary. Indeed, as Middlekauff puts it, Washington fought there “to preserve the public’s faith in the Revolution,” not only in the Mid-Atlantic states but all over America. The army was the chief force of national government and to a decisive extent the definer of the one country. Middlekauff is wise to call Washington’s political thinking itself “a form of constitutionalism.” As general he was reluctant to expand his powers, he deferred to Congress even as he pressed it, he refrained as much as possible from seizing supplies even as Congress in its impotence authorized seizures, he refused indignantly this or that invitation from a fellow officer that he himself seize power. At war’s end he laid down his generalship and retired from public life. Congress then honored him for always deferring to the civil power—Thomas Jefferson’s formulation—even when, one could say, it hardly existed.

MIDDLEKAUFF IS THOUGHTFUL, IF not fully successful, in clarifying just what Washington fought for. He sees the importance of Washington’s “vision,” and he ties the defining opinions about rights and politics to a principled constitutionalism, not, as in *The Glorious Cause*, to a Protestant past. But this he identifies with an “old constitutionalism,” commonly accepted, that somehow spread in Washington’s mind with his struggles for the nation. Washington himself, however, saw the nation as blessed not by hazy visions and old customs, but by an “epoch,” as he said in a circular letter to the governors, “when the rights of mankind were better understood” and the “collected wisdom” of philosophers and sages might be “happily applied in the establishment of our forms of government.” How could an old Anglo-American convention breed the “Citizen of the great republic of humanity at large” that he elsewhere proclaims himself? Middlekauff doubts that Washington was such an enlightened rationalist. He calls Washington a patron of justice, but not of equality: he stood for rights and mobility, but not natural rights, individualism, or democracy. But Washington in one of his general orders to the army spoke of protecting “the rights of humane nature, and establishing an Asylum for the poor and oppressed of all nations and religions.” From the start of his command he enforced freedom of religion, perhaps the crucial modern individual right. Nor was he the conventional slaveholder that Middlekauff describes. Even before the war this planter thought slavery unjust: a letter quoted by Middlekauff distinguishes free and just government by consent from our merely “arbitrary” rule over “blacks.” And while Washington was no patron of simple democracy, he promoted the effective popular self-government that mixed “free and equal” popular representation in the legislature with a strong executive. Accordingly, Washington could lead and inspire a democratic movement, or at least a liberal, constitutional, and popular movement.

Robert Middlekauff has written a morally generous and politically shrewd account of how constitutional, revolutionary, paradoxical, and politically formative was General George Washington, even before his two terms as president.

Robert K. Faulkner is research professor of political science at Boston College and the author, most recently, of *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics* (Yale University Press).



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