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# 1

## Parallel Lives

GEORGE WASHINGTON had many good things to say about Frederick the Great when, in the summer of 1786, he felt moved to honor the achievements of the world-famous king of Prussia in a few pointed words. His European friends had informed him about the pitiable state of health of the once so vigorous monarch, the man who had shaped the destinies of Prussia and Europe for nearly half a century. The resulting letter Washington sent to the Marquis de Lafayette twelve weeks before Frederick's death resembles a premature obituary.

Lafayette, Washington's companion from the days of the American Revolution, had himself sought out the infirm Prussian monarch only a few months earlier in Germany. Now Washington wrote to him that no one in the world was Frederick the Great's equal as a soldier. Likewise, having given his efficiently run Prussian state a rational imprint, he could "yield the palm to none" as a "politician." As a military leader and head of state, the king remained an unrivaled model for many generals and chief executives. Washington was one of them. And now, as he wrote, the "discernment" that the Prussian ruler had shown in receiving Lafayette so honorably would only "increase my opinion" of him.

But Washington did not leave it at this lavish praise. Surprisingly, his remarks culminated in a radical criticism. It was "to be lamented" that, like most "great characters," Frederick's was "not without a blot." Since the American Revolution of 1776, the people of Europe had also increasingly demanded a say in government as full citizens endowed with rights. Throughout his whole life, however, Frederick had opposed every form of popular participation in affairs of state. Even now, as a sick old man, he continued to rule his Prussia as an unfettered autocrat, handing down commands, edicts, orders, and decrees. The single touchstone of his political action was his own will. Yet in

Washington's view, it was disgraceful for "one man" all alone to rule over the inhabitants of a large empire according to his own whim, and thus to "tyrannize over millions." It cast "a shade" on his character that would "always" darken his achievement in the eyes of posterity.

Washington was very well acquainted with Frederick. As a young man, he had assiduously kept up with the Prussian king's career. When he himself first commanded an American regiment in Pennsylvania against the French in the Seven Years' War, he devoured reports of the bold victory that Frederick, as general of the Prussian army, had won over the same enemy at the Battle of Rossbach in Saxony. He earnestly admired the audacity with which the daring Frederick—although often outnumbered—subdued his opponents. And he owed him a debt of gratitude: By entangling the French troops in Europe in a long, debilitating war, Frederick contributed decisively to breaking French dominion over large parts of North America.

It is therefore no wonder that in 1759 Washington ordered a large bust of the Prussian king from a London merchant—a costly purchase intended to adorn the entrance hall to his Virginia estate of Mount Vernon. A few years later, he bought his stepson Jacky a figurine of a Prussian dragoon. This artful miniature of one of Frederick the Great's elite soldiers saw action on the wooden floors of the nursery at Mount Vernon.

As Frederick's luck in the Seven Years' War took a dramatic turn for the worse in 1760, and the Prussian king thought himself close to destruction, Washington felt his suffering. In letters to European informants, he inquired into the fate of the Americans' crucial ally. When the tide then unexpectedly turned and, after the Treaty of Hubertusburg in 1763, Frederick once again energetically ruled his country, Washington rejoiced for him. But then his enthusiasm for the heroic Prussian ruler waned—gradually at first, but irreversibly.

The deeper reason for this shift was that Washington's stance toward kingship in general radically changed. For, only a few years after the end of the Seven Years' War, the British king had declared war on his American subjects for steadfastly refusing to pay taxes to the Crown that they had not approved in their own colonial legislatures. Washington became a bitter foe of all forms of monarchy. From 1775 on, he led the War of Independence against the former mother country with feisty courage and fierce resolution as a republican general. Chosen by the democratically elected Continental Congress as supreme commander of the freshly founded United States of America, he developed into an uncompromising defender of the principle of popular sovereignty.

Upon his first great military triumphs, which launched the commander in chief to worldwide fame, Washington in turn drew the attention of Frederick the Great. In 1777, the Prussian king ordered his brother Prince Henry to follow every movement of the American general by assiduously reading reports of the war in newspapers and gazettes. Frederick quickly grasped that there were extremely few military commanders of the day who acted with as much bravery and strategic savvy as Washington. Yet the king's praise remained restricted to Washington's martial prowess. He had no taste for the new democratic-republican order of the United States. Although only two years after the American victory, in 1785, Frederick the Great signed a thorough Prussian-American trade agreement that met with Washington's approval, the monarch nevertheless regarded the political future of the United States with skepticism.

That is the spirit in which he expressed himself to Lafayette during their aforementioned meeting, which took place shortly after the agreement was concluded. In his view, democratic republics must sooner or later end in chaos. Not even the United States of America would manage to escape this fate. Only enlightened absolutism of the kind he himself had practiced with such conviction since ascending the throne in 1740 could vouchsafe to people—at least in his own country—enduring tranquility and order, peace and happiness. Lafayette immediately communicated these words to Washington, to whom they were doubtless addressed in spirit. In response, the American general—whom his countrymen would soon elect as their first president—penned the obituary-like letter in summer 1786 in which he enshrined his summary judgment of Frederick the Great.

The fact that Washington and Frederick constantly had their eye on one another, and that they time and again expressed fondness for each other despite all their differences, may have resulted from an intuitive sense of just how similar their lives were regardless of the many superficial contrasts between them. Indeed, the list of their common proclivities, desires, disappointments, and victories is as surprising as it is long.

As young men, both of them suffered terrible emotional distress when forced to forsake the love of women whom they would have married if only the latter had been available. Frederick and Washington could not indulge with the women of their first choice in the sensual passion and stormy sexual delight that they unabashedly endorsed. Both had to marry other women for reasons of expediency. In Frederick's case, political calculation was decisive. For Washington, it was a handsome dowry. Neither man sired children with

his wife. Instead, they assumed the guise of adoptive parents to the people whom, as heads of state, it was their duty to lead, nurturing them with a strict attentiveness that was very deliberately denoted as “fatherly.” The nations they took into their patriarchal charge became like adopted children.

This special sense of devotion extended as well to the animals they lived with. Thoroughbred horses and fleet-footed dogs received extremely lavish care. Washington and Frederick were practically besotted with their silvery greyhounds, whose aesthetic beauty, frisky playfulness, and lightning speed amazed them. Whenever one of their dogs died, they provided the animal with a dignified burial in a specially constructed vault. Frederick had the names of his greyhounds carved on a tombstone. Washington buried his favorite greyhound, Cornwallis, in a brick tomb furnished with a marble slab.

Both men also picked out their own burial places early on. They desired no monumental state funeral, no obsequies celebrated in stone cathedrals or palaces, but rather a simple service under an open sky. Their bodies, so they ordered, should be returned to the bosom of God-begotten nature whence they had sprung. Thus, they chose gravesites for themselves in the secluded areas where they most enjoyed spending time while alive: Frederick on the terraced hill of his pleasure palace Sanssouci, all framed in green; Washington on the verdant hill of his Mount Vernon estate, set in enchantingly beautiful surroundings.

The manicured scenery in which Frederick and Washington, both capable landscape architects, desired to find their eternal peace was largely the product of their own design. They planted borders and tended orchards with their own hands, and kept detailed records about their trees and the fruits they produced. The plants most highly valued by both men were the vine and the fig tree, in whose shade they built homes where they could find peace and quiet—just as the Bible describes life in the house of the Lord in the last days (Micah 4:4). These elaborate, architecturally sophisticated residences—Sanssouci and Mount Vernon—were likewise the fruit of Frederick’s and Washington’s own sketches and imaginations.

Not only Washington, the country gentleman from the American South, but also Frederick, the king of Prussia, were aided in their daily tasks from a tender age by slaves and valets imported from West Africa, without ever grappling very directly with the dubiousness of this form of servitude. On the other hand, they were both astonishingly generous, liberal, and open-minded when it came to paving the way for members of the most disparate confessions to practice their religion freely and peacefully.

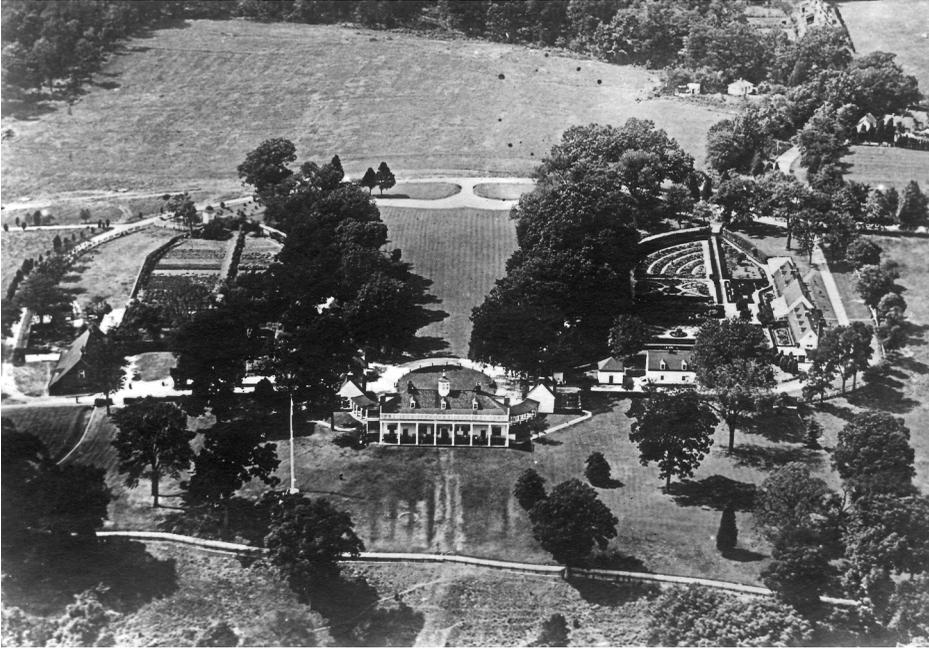


FIGURE 1.1. Washington's peaceful estate: Mount Vernon (akg-images).

Tolerance, acknowledgment of the right of differently minded people to think and act as they see fit, was a divine commandment that they respected absolutely, at least in the realm of religion. The Protestant Frederick, scion of a Calvinist dynasty, allowed a Roman Catholic cathedral to be built in the heart of his capital of Berlin. It was one of the most magnificent houses of worship of its day. Washington, an Anglican Protestant, not only showed support to Catholics but was also a perennial friend to American Jewish congregations. He regularly visited synagogues in a spirit of heartfelt sodality with those fellow citizens who gathered to worship there.

The equanimity with which Frederick and Washington observed and promoted the activities of all manner of religions in the states they governed was to a large extent rooted in their steady, profound faith in divine predestination, which both men had regarded since their youth as the ultimate cause of the world's events. Which prayer or which virtuous behavior pleased the will of the prime mover of all things was, in their estimation, the exclusive purview of this unfathomable, highest being that guided human affairs according to an inscrutable plan, dispensing grace and wrath at its pleasure. This unmistakably deist



FIGURE 1.2. Frederick's carefree country idyll: Sanssouci Palace.  
Painting by Carl Blechen, 1830 (akg-images).

conception of God, which Frederick and Washington shared their whole lives, also enabled them to exercise patience on days that were not as bright. For as willful as they were, they were also cognizant of how thoroughly their actions depended on favorable conditions, lucky coincidences, and everyday circumstances beyond their control. Both men were humble and composed enough to recognize the boundaries providence prescribed to their scope of action.

Yet faith in the power of providence also gave them the strength to persevere, even in seemingly hopeless situations, especially in war. Never giving in prematurely, they took risks and sought out bold solutions no matter the odds. This determination, born of unswerving faith, ultimately made them indomitable combatants in the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution. Given the astonishing victories they managed to win thanks to their staunch character and faith, they were not entirely free of the sense that they had been specially chosen by providence to perform extraordinary deeds.

Being so suffused with this sense of destiny, when it came to increasing the happiness of the states that they dutifully defended and conscientiously governed, they did not hesitate to co-opt regions and territories that had been inhabited and ruled by other peoples for centuries. Frederick steadily expanded his Kingdom of Prussia at the expense of eastern regions of the Holy Roman Empire and western Poland. He forcibly jammed his state between two age-old European realms, one ruled by an elected emperor and the other by an elected king. Having no use for the Kingdom of Prussia, which at the turn of the eighteenth century had not even existed, its neighbors were long standoffish and even hostile to it.

Similarly, Washington was the president of a gigantic federal state that, despite only coming into being in the eighteenth century, had since expanded ever more quickly and voraciously over the hunting grounds of the Iroquois Confederacy. The Indians, whose smoothly functioning alliance had been formed back in 1575, had gotten along just fine without white settlers for a very long time. Thus, both Prussia and the United States of America were brand-new, artificially created states that did not emerge organically but rather were constructed according to the rules of coolly calculating reason. There was no necessity for either of them to exist on the world map. Rather, they imposed themselves there, and consequently they were established largely on conquered and colonized country. Frederick and Washington had very clear ideas about how to shape and cultivate this newly acquired territory.

The model of civilization to which both men adhered was an ideal of light and progress that called for the comprehensive education of all social strata—a

concept that had been proposed by Enlightenment philosophers at the turn of the eighteenth century and developed and refined in the following decades. Frederick and Washington gravitated toward different authors within this tradition. The former was an enthusiastic admirer of the Frenchman Voltaire, the latter of the Englishman Joseph Addison. Like his model Voltaire—and under his tutelage—the Prussian king himself wrote philosophical poems. Washington, inspired and animated by the art of argumentation brought to rhetorical perfection by Addison, composed speeches, articles, and letters to convince Americans of the value of his political goals. Despite this difference in personal taste, both men were united in the view that without the writings of the English philosopher John Locke, whom they admired and on whose work both Addison and Voltaire had built, the Age of Enlightenment never would have been born.

Frederick the Great and Washington lived proper Enlightenment lifestyles. They were abiding readers of belles lettres, scientific treatises, political essays, letters, and sentimental poetry. They both also authored texts of their own. Frederick devoted himself to poetry, philosophical and political essays, and political historiography. Washington composed speeches and political appeals that often took the form of public letters. The Prussian king and the American president collected books with bibliophilic passion. When they died, the shelves of their libraries were bursting with volumes of every format. Yet it was not only themselves whom they wished to educate through lifelong reading and learning. In line with the tenets of Enlightenment philosophy, which could not imagine the permanent increase in individual understanding without a steady advancement of knowledge on the societal level, they fervently championed the improvement of school and university education in the states they governed.

Pleasure and learning were by no means mutually exclusive for them. Both men regularly took in dramatic performances. Visits to the theater were welcome, valued pastimes in their hours of leisure. They often found enjoyment in parlor games, music, and dancing as well. They were similarly fashion conscious and loved good food and drink. Although as soldiers they could display extreme toughness and severity, they were also capable of big emotions, radiating quasi-romantic tenderness in their most intimate moments.

The parallels between Frederick the Great's and George Washington's lives can therefore not be overlooked. They are numerous and significant. Indeed, one can justifiably claim that these two men are unique in this respect, as there is practically no other historically significant and politically relevant figure

across the entire eighteenth century whose life story even remotely approximates those of this king and this president. Neither the Habsburg ruler Maria Theresa (Prussia's faithful arch-antagonist) nor the enlightened absolutist Empress Catherine II (herself celebrated as "great") nor any male head of state of the Age of Enlightenment had as much in common with Frederick and Washington as they had with one another.

It is therefore all the more astounding that no comprehensive assessment of Frederick's and Washington's parallel lives has as yet been undertaken, despite the fact that a comparative approach to their biographies promises to be especially informative. For despite their many arresting similarities, Frederick and Washington understood themselves to be the leading representatives of two highly disparate forms of rational political enlightenment: the "top-down," absolutist, monarchical type in Prussia and the "bottom-up," democratic, parliamentary version in America. What is more, they understood one another in this way, and they grasped each other's manifest political significance as the nonpareil personification of Prussia and the United States, the most modern nations of the day. Indeed, this distinction was the reason that, despite their mutual admiration, they ultimately vilified one another. While Washington disparaged the Prussian king as a tyrant, Frederick condemned the American political system that Washington helped found as a descent into anarchy.

The cleft between Frederick and Washington was such a great source of provocation because it highlighted the glaring contradiction between the two paths of political enlightenment from which progressive minds in the eighteenth century had to choose. Both men had fervent supporters, even in Germany. The writer Karl Philipp Moritz celebrated the elderly King Frederick as the "morning sun" of the Enlightenment, while Immanuel Kant referred to the entire eighteenth century as the "century of Frederick." In contrast, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe described Washington as a shining star in the Enlightenment's "firmament of politics and war." This shows that the Prussian king's enlightened absolutism had ceased to be regarded as the sole possible form of political enlightenment long before his death. Even Frederick's brother Henry praised the liberal aspirations across the Atlantic that, now in Europe as well, provided a model for a different understanding of enlightened government.

Even though it was not yet clear in the eighteenth century which path of political enlightenment the future would belong to, contemporaries were at least well informed about the alternatives and what they entailed. They certainly had a choice. Frederick and Washington, too, made a deliberate decision to adopt one specific political system over another. Once, when one of

Washington's officers suggested to him that he set himself up as king, the latter angrily rebuffed the proposal as outrageous intrigue—very different from the path taken a short time later by the republican general Napoleon Bonaparte in France. As for Frederick, he had no shortage of opportunities to introduce forms of parliamentary participation in Prussia. Yet he did not act on them. Indeed, whenever possible he ignored even long-established representative assemblies in the territories he ruled and conquered.

Considered objectively, then, Frederick and Washington were able to choose which path of enlightenment they wished to take. On the other hand, both were born—in 1712 and 1732, respectively—into highly circumscribed patterns of life, very traditional families, and entrenched political frameworks. These circumstances shaped them so profoundly that it is worth considering what options they subjectively believed were available to them. Their individual lives were so tightly intertwined with the history and likewise parallel development of the Kingdom of Prussia and the United States of America that they cannot be interpreted distinctly from them.

The model for writing parallel lives was created nearly 2,000 years ago by the Greek author Plutarch. His comparative biographies of great Greeks and Romans, which he called *Bioi paralleloi* (*Parallel Lives*), inspired countless biographers in subsequent centuries to review the personal characters of two like individuals who had been in similar historical situations, culminating in a fair and balanced judgment of their individual achievements. Plutarch's diptychs continue to instruct us today, as they are still exemplary models for how great figures from the past can be deftly and meaningfully compared to one another so as to draw lessons for the present.

Plutarch teaches us that anecdotes—"a slight thing like a phrase or a jest"—tell us more about the character of an individual than "battles when thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities." It is therefore unnecessary to narrate the glorious deeds of the compared figures "exhaustively . . . in each particular case." Furthermore, although biographers are always required to render their historical judgment, they may not point the finger of the holier-than-thou moralist at the mistakes and weaknesses of their subjects. Rather, their accounts must convey a sense of regret that human nature, weak as it is, can never produce an entirely spotless moral character.

Plutarch's guidance is indispensable. Yet when comparing the lives of Frederick the Great and George Washington, the historian must go beyond Plutarch, as the latter described and compared lives that were similar but

sometimes separated by a vast temporal distance. He focused first on the life further in the past, then separately on the one closer to his own day. Only in a final assessment of the personalities and achievements of the two men did he then undertake to compare them and render his distilled judgment in a way that he considered emblematic and instructive for contemporary readers.

In the case of Frederick and Washington, a comparative portrait can only be meaningful and illuminating if their parallel lives are sketched within the frame of, and as an integral part of, a much larger historical context that is common to both of them. This context includes the origin stories of Prussia and the independent United States, but it is broader still, encompassing the main features of the intellectual history of the Age of Enlightenment. For only within such a comprehensive historical framework can the significance of their constitutional legacy be adequately assessed. And we must constantly grapple with this legacy if we are to gain insight into which path of enlightenment we want to continue on today—a journey that began in the year 1701 with a dazzling political sunrise.

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