**George Washington and the Prayer at Valley Forge – Myth or Reality. What Is the Higher Truth**

Tracing the historical current of myths can be tricky and events that occur in the full light of history can take on the overtones of being mythological. It can be debated whether every individual story has to be true or can it be a mythology. A story, about a historical individual, a hero, like a Julius Caesar or a Napoleon, even if in fact it cannot be documented, is one more way by which we can understand their greatness.

To understand heroic greatness, I want to jump right into our own history. Take for example, a seminal event, George Washington at Valley Forge. This is a fundamental event in our own American mythology, our own higher truths of America as the land of freedom, as America chosen by God to bring freedom to the world, as the American who is patriotic and fights in a just cause.

Go back with me to January 17, 1778. It is a cold, bitter, snowy winter at Valley Forge. George Washington has brought his small Continental Army to this area not very far from Philadelphia. They’ve gone into winter quarters knowing that the British Army is only a few miles up the road in Philadelphia. But, the British commander is lazy and he has a girlfriend there and it’s difficult to carry out a campaign in the winter, so Washington is quite confident, the “Ole Fox,” as the British called him, will not attack. Far more danger lies in the conditions at Valley Forge, the extreme cold.

We can visit that spot today. There are few more evocative places in America than there at Valley Forge with those reconstructed huts were those brave soldiers carried the light of freedom—their coats worn, many of them having no shoes, living on dried peas, and salt pork most days. Dysentery and influenza, was common. Sometimes no more than 40 percent of the troops could turn out for their drill instructor, General Friedrich von Steuben who in that cold bitter winter would take these undisciplined Continental soldiers and turn them into a first class fighting force that can take the British on in hand-to-had combat with bayonets that can hold up to any British charge, even their most elite troops. How long can they stand and endure these conditions? A good day is when a few cows are purchased and brought in and the men fall like hungry wolves upon this rare meat. Lice are plenty. One of their primary activities is sitting around the fire cracking lice.

In the midst of this desperate time, there are two of the higher officers on this January 17, Peter Muhlenberg, a general, and the Marquis de Lafayette, both of them high officers in the Continental army. The Marquis de Lafayette, still a young man, has left behind the life of leisure in France to come and fight for freedom. And to George Washington he will become like a son. He’s riding along with General Perter Muhlenberg. Muhlenberg was born in Pennsylvania to German-American parents. They sent him to Germany to go to university. While there he enlisted in the Prussian dragoons and for his courage and daring in battle he earned the name Teufel Piet, Devil Pete. He has come back to America. He was a Lutheran minister and as the clouds of war become ever more intense, he stood up in his congregation one Sunday, his ministerial robes on him, and took as the text “there is a time for war and a time for peace,” pulled off his ministerial robes and showed that he was dressed in the uniform of a Continental officer. He was serving Washington along with the Marquis de Lafayette.

The two of them are deep in conversation. They’re talking about a horse that General Washington has bought and given as a present to the Marquis. Muhlenberg says, “It sounds like a magnificent horse, I would love to see it.” Lafayette says, “If you have the time I’ll take you by, it’s in that barn right down the road,” So, they stop, tie their horses, open the barn door, and inside is General Washington, down on his knees praying, praying with intense devotion, asking the help of God in this moment of crisis, that his country might win its freedom. So deep in prayer is Washington, he doesn’t notice the two men who standing behind him, he doesn’t even notice the cold blast of winter air that comes through opened door. The two of them look at one another, turn softly, and as quietly as possible shut the door behind them.

You will not find at Valley Forge a monument showing where George Washington knelt in prayer. The various authorities don’t believe, I suppose, that it’s well enough documented and the story rests on rather scanty evidence. One version of it was told to Reverend Nathaniel Snowden, and it has come down in his diary in the Pennsylvania Historical Society. Reverend Snowden writes that one day he was with Isaac Potts, Quaker Potts as he calls him, and it was in fact in Isaac Potts house that George Washington had his headquarters during the time at Valley Forge. They were riding along and Snowden asks the Quaker, “Well, how is it, Quaker Potts, that you became a Whig and a supporter of the Revolution, for most of your fellow Quakers were Tories and did not understand that we had to fight for our freedom?”

“Well, I’ll tell you.” Potts said, “In fact ride with me a little further on across my property. You see that meadow right there?”

“I do.”

“Well, it was right at that meadow I changed my mind from being a Tory, who believed America could not win this war, into being a patriot, and what turned my mind was General Washington.”

“General Washington, how?”

“Well, as I was riding along I came upon a figure kneeling. I got closer, I thought it might be a person in distress, but in fact it was General Washington praying, praying with a devotion, a fervor, that I have never heard before or since. He was praying to God to deliver his country and bring it to freedom. I went home that night to my wife and I said from this moment on I support the Revolution. With a general like Washington with his deep belief in God, we cannot lose.”

The first story came from an account published in 1878 and it was in a small journal called *The Aldine Press* and it was written by a former pension agent. He had been born not long after the cannons had fallen silent as he said at Yorktown. He lived a long life and for much of that life he was a government agent responsible for handing out pensions to Revolutionary War heroes and they would tell these stories in his presence of what it had been like to be at Valley Forge. As he grew older, he thought that these brave deeds and stories of these old heroes of America should be recorded and thus he recorded this story of Perter Muhlenberg and the Marquis de Lafayette.

So, the stories came from a diary by a Reverend and stories by old Revolutionary War heroes recorded by an ex-pension agent, secondhand evidence I suppose you’d say in a court of law. At one time, it was thought that there was a third evidence, firsthand. In 1890 there was brought forward by a collector a set of prayers, a little book of prayers that were said by General Washington. But, the Smithsonian Institute would not accept it. The editor at the time of George Washington’s Papers did not accept it, did not seem to be in the general’s handwriting, and so that firsthand evidence is highly questionable. [Could General Washington have had an aid write the prayers for him?]

But I don’t think any of the stories are questionable. In fact, I think they lead us exactly into our theme of mythology as a means of conveying higher truths. The higher truth was that George Washington was deeply religious. He believed in God. He believed that God had put him in that position, that he must carry out the will of God, and that God would ultimately see this country through to victory. That is what sustained him in these darkest of hours.

On one occasion, when he had received a letter from a minister who had sent a copy of his sermon praying to God for help, Washington said to is secretary, “Write back to the minister, thank him for his sermon. Thank him for his kind words about me and my character, and tell him that without the aid of God we cannot triumph and that God will be on our side.” Additionally, in his Farewell Address to his fellow citizens, Washington admonished us that those who tell you that you can separate freedom from morality and morality from religion wish to lead you down the road to despotism. Freedom, religion, morality, they were utterly entwined in Washington’s words.

No nation can remain free unless the citizens as individuals are moral and no one can be moral without religion—morality, liberty, religion. that was Washington’s belief. Our first, and perhaps greatest president, believed in God and even if you think both these stories of his prayer are false or unprovable, they convey the higher truth of religion at the foundation of our country. And so with the Declaration of Independence, which Washington read to his troops, tears flowing down his face; we put our trust in the creator, the supreme judge of the universe and his enduring right and wrong.