

## History 211 US Military History Discussion Transcript for February 11, 2021

### Main Reading: Caroline Cox on George Washington

*Caroline Cox's evocative chapter on the importance of integrity to the success of Washington's leadership makes for a compelling narrative, but I wondered if students in History 211 would question her "heroic" storyline after reading a revisionist approach from Thomas Howell earlier in the week. The following selections come from student comments:*

#### MEANING OF INTEGRITY

STUDENT COMMENT: In reading Cox's article, I noticed a key idea that she was trying to convey in her writing. Cox wanted the reader to recognize how Washington saw immense value in establishing a "reputation for integrity" (15) and how this contributed to his effectiveness as a leader. An emphasis was placed on Washington's distinct ability "to instill in soldiers a pride in being part of the army itself and part of the larger Revolutionary cause" (23).

This instilling of personal integrity to Washington's men in large part helped the United States win the Revolutionary War. However, Cox mentions how "some questioned his competence" (27) and even "various American political and military leaders who thought that others—perhaps even they themselves—would make better commanders in chief" (27). The author cites an example of the "Conway Cabal" (28), who wrote a letter that questioned Washington's leadership abilities. Washington got his hands on this letter and was deeply disturbed by it. Washington then responds to the letter by "going public with their criticisms and objecting to these slights to his reputation." (27) This display of rectitude and choice to not shy away from his critics "served to cement his positive reputation." Thus, showing at his core Washington was "the ideal public servant: independent and incorruptible" (20) but also very in touch with the common man's interests as well.

STUDENT COMMENT: This article by Caroline Cox focuses on how George Washington was a leader in every way, and how he was such a successful leader because he had integrity, which according to Cox meant that Washington was "independent, incorruptible, selfless, dedicated, honest, and of sound moral principle" (16). Having integrity was very important to Washington all throughout his life. As a young boy Washington realized the major concept that only by respecting others could a person earn respect, which echoes the common phrase still used today that is treat others the way you want to be treated. Washington also gained integrity through his own sociability, determination, and curiosity; also, with the death of his father and half-brother at a young age, Washington had to grow up quickly and learn how to use his leadership and managerial skills (18). Then on top of managing a business, Washington also took on the role of being a soldier in the Virginia state militia, and, while he did make some mistakes, he had a substantial part in leading the militia and subsequently provincial troops in the Ohio Valley in 1754 and through the French and Indian War (18). It was his experience in both business and military, as well as his leadership and integrity that Congress and the army/soldiers trusted him.

STUDENT COMMENT: Before I get started, I wanted to say how much I appreciated that reading. George Washington has been one of my childhood heroes because his 'extreme ownership' (SEE NAVY SEALS LEADERSHIP BOOK BY WILLINK AND BABIN) has been passed down through generations of military leaders and continues today. In the beginning of the passage Cox talks about how the Revolutionary war may be ending while soldiers have not received their promised compensations. Soldiers threatened Congress that if there was any peace treaty, they would not disarm. The first thing that stands out to be about George Washington's leadership is rather than threatening Congress, he was able to earn the Congress's respect and absorbed large sums of money through Congress for the Continental Army with his integrity. There are many areas where a leader needs to devote their attention and George Washington made sure to address all of them.

### **WASHINGTON AND HIS TROOPS**

STUDENT COMMENT: Though the article written by Caroline Cox gave its main concentration to the integrity of Washington and how vital his moral senses contributed to his leadership, there was one factor throughout the article that wasn't overtly mentioned though it was routinely spoken of. This factor would be the presence that Washington had, how he maintained it and how it impacted his army not only from a morale standpoint but from a standpoint of combat action. In the case of the latter, it was mentioned that Washington rode the line between casual and respected. Specifically, as recorded by Lt. John Bell Tiden, Washington made a point of meeting his officers and engaging with them on a personal level. Tiden "was thrilled by this mark of warmth-" and "was in awe of Washington's informality and accessibility, which only increased his trust in him." (Cox, pp. 24-25) On the other hand, Washington maintained his status as a superior by rarely engaging in social activities for the leisure of it, focusing more on his "reputation as a man of great integrity and the value of visibility and personal interaction" (Cox, 25). This strategy of reserved yet informal acquittance would only amplify the importance of Washington's word when he addressed his soldiers, such as when he effectively shut down the Newburgh conspiracy just through giving a speech.

STUDENT COMMENT: Appointing George Washington as commander and chief was pivotal to overcoming obstacles during the war. His ability to use his honesty and reputation with a cool head was the traits that allowed him to do so. From the beginning of the war, he played cautiously, listening closely to those that counseled him. He realized that he had to gain trust of his officers and men due to the volunteer nature of the force. Without conscription the continental army relied on the reenlistment of volunteers and their continued trust in the motives of the Continental Congress. For men like Joseph Plumb Martin, they joined the fight with ideas of heroism and beliefs about right and wrong. As the conflict went on factors such as starvation and distrust in Congress created a lack of belief. George Washington recognized this and the possible consequences. He "...draw on his personal integrity to instill in soldiers a pride in being part of the army itself and part of the large revolutionary cause." The character built over his youth and the experience from his time as a public servant allowed him to keep the force unified and trusting in his decisions and the cause.

## **CHALLENGING COX**

STUDENT COMMENT: In the chapter “Integrity and Leadership,” Caroline Cox invites readers to view George Washington as more than just a war general, but as someone who “embodied the ideal of the officer and gentleman” (15). As an essential figure during the American Revolution and events that preceded it, she stresses the work of other scholars that praise Washington’s archetypal leadership and “centrality of his integrity” (16). According to her, to have integrity means to go out of one’s way, establish moral principle, be mindful, and value empathy. As an exemplary leader, Cox argues that Washington established his reputation by responsibly managing expenses, reputation in congress, and military experience. Although “a slave owner and a speculator in western lands,” his integrity remained intact as he proved to be a qualified war general that instilled confidence in others and embodied Whig ideals (20). Cox’s chapter allowed me to view Washington from a different lens, but I was also focused on the way she positively framed him as an ideal leader. Throughout the text, I was surprised to see how many times she reminded her audience that his actions “fortified” his integrity time and again. Should she have explained critiques against Washington in greater depth, I think readers would have felt invited to come up with their own conclusions on whether he deserves the credit she gives him. By delving into Washington’s role as a leader through a master-narrative lens, it is evident that Cox holds a bias as her evidence and choice of words try their best to proclaim Washington’s efforts as ideal.

## **WASHINGTON’S LEGACY**

STUDENT COMMENT: What I found to be most interesting about Caroline Cox’s chapter, “Integrity and Leadership: George Washington,” was hearing about the stories of how he commanded and seeing the parallels to his methods with the current Army Values we see present today. The US Army is an organization built on seven core values: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. George Washington seemed to exemplify all of these qualities before they became Army doctrine. This chapter explained that Washington’s success was built on this reputation he had which was mainly built on trust and honor. Building trusting relationships, leading by example, and engraining the concept of selfless service to his men. Going back to the beginning of the chapter when there were threats of the Army’s refusal to disarm or disband unless the men were compensated for their efforts. Washington was able to turn these men who were on the brink of mutiny into, “dutiful servants of the new nation,” with simple call for these men, “to remember their own ‘sacred honor’,” (Cox pg. 15).

STUDENT COMMENT: Although Washington lost many battles in the American revolution, he did not falter from the end goal of independence. At many points the continental army would have fallen apart without the integrity of George Washington, and the leadership of that military understood that. To have a figure like Washington lead the example of statesmanship, but more importantly command of the army, was likely one of Washington’s greatest impacts to the nation. In an unprecedented time of American military leadership, Washington created the precedent of strategic morality and character on the battlefield.