Read a copy of Mason Weems life of George Washington and discuss how this work is or is not a reflection of American values before the Civil War.

Question posed by Professor Howard

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Mason Locke Weems is recognized as the author of The Life of Washington, perhaps, one of the most widely read books in American history. In the book is found the famous anecdote of young George and the cherry tree. Weems, an ordained Episcopal priest, launched his long career in 1793 as a promoter and seller of books and pamphlets. A year later he began a thirty year partnership with the publisher, Mathew Carey. Weem's first edition of Washington's biography appeared in 1800 only a few months after Washington's death. Already in 1797 Weems mentioned to Carey that experience in book selling told him people wanted to read about "men whose courage and abilities, whose patriotism and Exploits have won the love and admiration of the American people.... Let us give them something worth their money." Six months prior to Washington's death he informed the publisher he was ready with a short popular account. He asked Carey: "What say you to printing it for me and ordering a copper plate Frontpiece of that Heroe, something in this way, George Washington Esqr. The Guardian Angel of his Country?" After Washington's death, Weems was ready with an 80 page first edition, noting it could be sold for high profit due to probable high popular demand. A publisher other than Carey printed the tract in 1800.[1]

John Marshall's official and scholarly biograhy published over a period of five years proved to be a disappointment to the waiting public. Weems persuaded Carey to republish his own tract in 1806. It was here that the cherry tree incident first appeared. In 1808 Weems discontinued selling Marshall's biography and devoted his energies to expanding his tract into a book of over 200 pages. Minor changes appeared in subsequent editions and continued to sell well. When Parson Weems died in 1825 his biography was already in its 29th printing. A century later the eightieth edition had been issued. Many of the anecdotes were assumed by other biographers of Washinton, and the cherry tree incident even found its way

into the McGuffey Readers.

Subsequently, critics of Weems objected to his work as a fraud and mere hack work, insisting that he gave a false and even repelling picture of Washington, portraying him as a prude. In fact Weem's biography stimulated an ongoing historiographic debate. But the question is, historicity aside, why was it written? Why was it so popular? In what ways did it reflact the values of the time? Did the biography accurately reflect the values of the age? Why such a wide and popular sale? Before we can approach answers to these questions a brief survey of the values reflected in Weem's, Life of Washington is in order.

The closing chapters of The Life of Washington (1809 edition) are a summary of the virtues that made Washington a charismatic representative hero--the father of his countrymen. The virtues included Benevolence, Industry, and Patriotism--each one deeply rooted in religion. Washington was a man of piety, prayer and reverence. Early training taught him to be dutiful and use his talents in accordance with the Book of Nature and moral philosophy--that is, "God is love." If the nation followed him as exemplar in championing the rules of order and right, the nation will prosper. National happiness cames only through morals that are supported by religion. Law is not enough--it must be based in "religion and morality, those great pillars of human happiness, those firmest props of the duties of men and citizen." Washington, as the father symbol, experienced happiness because his virtuous life was grounded upon religious principle. His countrymen, Weems held, saw him as the best of men and, therefore, a favorite of heaven.

Since God is love, Washington, like a father, practiced benevolence toward others. In total control of his passion, reason ruled his life and he consistently practiced forbearance and forgiveness while rejecting hatred and he bestowed generosity for the poor. Kind deference was displayed t-

those beneath his station. This kindness of mind among enlightened citizens, Weems admonished, was of great importance to the Republic and would serve as a nursery when practiced in the emergence of effective leadership.

Washington's Industry, Weemes continues, was worthy of emulation, and if adapted, sloth would leave the country. Industry is the handmaiden to health, wealth, innocence and happiness. Through industry Washington nurtured a small patrimony into great wealth. Carefully dividing his time into periods of sleep, devotion, recreation, and business Washington always studied how his energies could thus be used to serve his country as a soldier, statesman, and teacher. His rigidly regimented life, by way of unsought reward, resulted in wealth - "Oh! Divine Industry." Washington, like most of his countrymen, was raised from poverty and obscurity and came to wealth through application of industry, finally becoming the father of his country. Parson Weems at this point can't resist a preachment peorting American youth: "Honor God: and delight in glorious toil" and you too can lead the people and eventually rise to wealth.

Finally and crucially, Washington was represented as a Patriot, upholding union and withstanding disunion. He was a true Republican, recognizing only merit in others and abjured all traces of nepotism among his aides. Respect for governmental authority, and obedience to its laws was true liberty. In his Farewell Address Washinton dwelt, like a true teacher from God, on union and brotherly love. Union is the main pillar of liberty and independence, disunion is treason. Three times, Weems points out, Washington thwarted disunion, dreading most the separation of the states, and stated: "if honor, patriotism, if union, and brotherly love should prevail - then the victory will be sure....that shall immortalize blessings of liberty to our children and childrens' children." The dignity and lustre of the Republic will serve to lead the world in progress toward [illegible].

The actual development of Weem's biographical and anecdotal treatment of the life of Washington need not detain us except for a number of observations. The Parson notes that Washington was inculcated with piety and patriotism at an early age, that his father taught him early that everything comes from God, and that here, in this knowledge, lay the germ of piety and morality. Washington loved the truth (our familiar cherry tree) and hated the base and the false. Reason ruled his passion; he loved bodily exercise and, supposedly, could throw a stone across the Rappahannock.

His public career served as a base for Weems to carefully single out Washington's virtues. Humbly he received a prize from Burgessess for his exploits during 1753. Courage is displayed when 1500 savage foes attacked his small force of 300. He was obedient to Braddock even though the orders of that general were stupid. Washington, in his wisdom, knew two years before everyone else, that Fort Dequesne was "the key to the Western World." During the Revolutionary War his brilliant generalship at Princeton and Trenton turned the tide of the world, and in effect, founded a new wide empire of liberty and virtue. Always gallant and courageous in battle, he was also noble and generous when the enemy surrendered at Yorktown and averted vengeance against the British on the part of his soldiers.

When Washington's army disbanded, Weems noted, they wanted to make the general a king. Washington was true to himself - he had fought for liberty and thus had conquered himself. He would not be a tyrant and trample liberty under feet.

After the war Weems pictured Washinton as the gentleman farmer, establishing the reign of liberty through scientific husbandry. Duty, however, called once again when the young Republic faltered. He willingly accepted new responsibilities he really did not want. Europe watched America as an example for her own regeneration but the Confederation was crumbling. Disunity from within and without threatened Washington's

presidency, yet he succeeded through his wise leadership and diplmacy to produce national stability.

At the age of 66 the Father of the Country laid his official burdens down and when he came to die, he died like a true soldier-resigned and victorious over himself - his last enemy. The Father of the Country was gone but the legacy perpetuated for his children was TRUTH, PEACE, LAW, and RELIGION.

Weem's Life of Washington was written to meet the felt values of a Pre-Civil War America swept by romanticism, individualism, the rise of the common man, anti-institutionalism, anti-intellectualism, and societal fragmentation. The old stable corporate view of eighteenth century America had changed. The pace was quickened. A new nation had emerged with little past history amid the expanse of a vast continent. How could an individualistic, fragmented society, with little sense or corparate unity discover itself within the framework of its own history? The apotheosis of Washington into a national charismatic father symbol and the virtues he embodied, as protrayed by Weems, must be seen as a degree of progression in the pursuit of nationalism which stressed, seemingly paradoxically, rugged individualism and anti-institutionalsim. The nature of the national community needed definition.

Weems discovered what American wanted - their need to believe in national destiny, their ferocious patriotism and pride, their religiosity, and romanticism. He combined all of these elements simultaneously into his biography and underscored values in Washington's character, that would give coherence to an essentially inchoate society. Pre-Civil War America had a deep and abiding social concern in spite of its romantic individualism. They felt a strong need for control in society and the necessity of education to create citizens for life in a stable society. The values found in Weem's biography - essentially those of a corporate society - could be

applied to the new individualistic society in the transmuted form of the mythological Washington symbol. Washington became symbolic of what each citizen could become in an individualistic society through emulation of Washington's virtues. Citizens, educated in those values, could then build a meaningful democratic society that would lead to stability in an essentially disparate society. Although the Pre-Civil War generation had abandoned the views of the eighteenth century corporate society, the elite and aristocratic persuasions of a hierarchical society, as expressed in Weem's biography, could be altered in emphasis to meet the needs of an individualistic romantic society. Washington, up to the Civil War, was so venerated, that no biographer would dream of criticising him. The Washington Father myth symbol, never unapproachable to the commom man as portrayed by Weems, stood for values he felt had to be adopted by a nation that required control and direction if stability were to replace fear of anarchy.

The necessity of Pre-Civil War America to embrace the values of Weem's biography is perceptibly presented in an article by John L. Thomas, "Romantic Reform in America, 1815-1865."[2] Progress, Thomas said, for the Enlightenment and the Founding Fathers who took a somewhat pessimistic view of mankind, would be the results of checks within government. The checks balanced a conflict of selfish interests within society and led to an ensuing improvement in society. During the first half of the nineteenth century, however, a revolution in religion occured that changed "an Enlightenment doctrine of progress into a dynamic principle of reform"(659). The nemesis of the new perfectionist imagination of Romantic Reform and its concept of progress was that it "assumed the shape of personal guilt and estrangement from a pre-established divine order"(660). Romantic emphasis upon individual reform had led, in effect, to a [illegible] of responsibility for failure, and a feeling of guilt

that perfection was not being achieved. The traditional belief that man could arrage society by the perfection of individual virtue and the destruction of oppressive social institutions appeared to have fallen far short of its goals. Guilt was the result. Thomas defines romantic reform in the following manner:

> The central fact in the romantic reorientation in American theology was the rejection of determinism. Salvation, however, variously defined, lay open to everyone. Sin was voluntary: men were not helpless and depraved by nature but free agents and potential powers for good. Sin could be reduced to selfish preferences of individuals and social evils, in turn to collective sins which, once acknowledged, could be rooted out....The progress of the country suddenly seemed to depend upon the regeneration of the individual and the contagion of example. (658-659)

Education of the individual and the virtuous example of the moral man became the key to progress for the regeneration of the individual. The application of individual integrity applied in ever widening circles, would effect society at large. A model of good behavior, the mythologized Washington, whose example could furnish the moral tone and give some credulity to a value system nexus in an anti-institutionally oriented society, was immedieately deified. Small wonder, then, that Weem's biography, The Life of Washington, as a symbol of hope in a guilty age where the perfection of romantic reform often went awry, continued to be so popular. The societal millennium built upon an archetypal idea was falling short of achievement and Washington, a hero symbol, showed the path toward hope.

Corroborative evidence that the values found in Parson Weem's biography of Washington were in essential agreement with Pre-Civil War America is provided by Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age by John William Ward. Jackson's moral excellence treated under the major rubrics of Nature, Providence, and Will are entirely the same as those found in Weem's biography of Washington. The benevolence, industry, and patriotism of both are similarly stressed. Both hero symbols are exibited as leaders of the

people, but invariably accessible and approachable. What fascinated me is that both are mythologized as hero leaders of a nation whose destiny is built upon the principles of liberty and virtue. The Romantic faith and the will to believe in national destiny stand sharply in the foreground in both books.

Symbols, other than in human form, reflect the values of an age. In my files I found a copy of E. McClung Fleming's "Symbols of the United States: From Indian Queen to Uncle Sam." (Book unknown--my copy is xeroxed) Between the years 1755 to 1850 these symbols were used and the time periods of their use overlapped. The Indian Princess, the Neoclassical Plumed Goddess, the American Liberty, Columbia, Brother Jonathan, and Uncle Sam--each suggests something about the society in which it was popular, the rise of American nationality, and the major values associated with America. We are concerned particularly with Columbia because it best illustrates the value nexus found in Weem's biography of Washington. Columbia first appeared in the 1730's, but by 1810 it had changed in meaning that will prove the thesis. An unknown artist, in 1810, showed Columbia holding an American flag in the left hand, the other hand placing a wreath upon the head of a marble bust of Washington, crushing the British Crown beneath her feet. Columbia appeared everywhere in the Pre-Civil War Era symbolizing first, liberty, and secondly, Columbus' voyage. The voyage from Europe represented Europe as the guest in a radically new world, the promise of finding earth's first paradise in the East by the general movement westward. Columbia represented the fulfillment of history by a return to Eden. The promise of finding earth's original paradise in the East necessitated a movement to the West to complete the full circle leading to the Eden somewhere in the East. Columbia, however, came to mean in the Pre-Civil War Republic the belief in liberty. Liberty and Columbia soon fused

into American Liberty--an image of the Republic's great historic mission with its great moral ideal. It sounds very much like values in Weem's Washington Hero Symbol--a symbol suggesting the guest for national solidarity, a society built upon morality, and a nation with a unique world mission. These were the ideals of Pre-Civil War Romanticism.

Danial Boorstin in The National Experience, notes that Bancroft's histories became immediately important because they spoke of hope in America's destiny in the early years of national life, when localism prevailed, when national meaning and purpose was vague and confusing. Bancroft "as high priest of American nationality" spoke of a mission for mankind through exertion of national purpose. But the very same may be said of Parson Weems some years earlier. Why was Weem's book written? Daniel Boorstin reasons:

> While Weems aimed to produce a book primarily for 'the admiring eyes of our children', his book should be classified neither as juvenile nor as nonfiction but as booster literature. Others applied their booster enthusiasm and booster optimism to the future; he applied his to the past. Weems, like other boosters, asserted facts for which there was little or no foundation, but we must not forget that, in the contagious vagueness of American life, distinctions which elsewhere seemed sharp--were hard to draw....as the work begins so it ends. The three final chapters, on the character of Washington, describe his religion, his benevolence, his industry, and his patriotism--all as the natural response of the greatest of all men to the greatest of all challerges, America. (343-344)

Without a doubt, I see that the values in Weems' Washington biography, with the sole exeption of the eighteenth century view of corporate society, are in essential accord with Pre-Civil War Romantic values. Weems portrayed Washington in terms of what many wanted to believe about themselves and America in spite of their doubts about their enterprise leading to a cohesive individualistic society.

[1] See Marcus Cunliffe, "Introduction" in Mason L. Weems, The Life of Washington (Cambridge, Mass., Beknop Press, 1962), for a study of Weem's life. Information on Weems may also be found in Daniel J. Boorsin's The Americans: The National Experience, Vol. II (New York: Random House, 1965), in section 39, "The Mythologizing of George Washington," pp.337-356. Quotations in this paper from Boorstin are found in this section. The Life of Washington I read was published in 1927 by Grosset and Dunlap.

[2] John L. Thomas, "Romantic Reform in America, 1815-1865," American Quarterly, XVII, pp. 656-681.