The Statue of George Washington and the Dangers of Idolization

There are 129 national monuments in the United States.¹ The oldest monument known is the Megalithic Temples of Malta. It dates back to 3600 and 700 BC and is located on the islands of Malta and Gozo. Each temple was built with remarkable skill, and “each complex is a unique architectural masterpiece.”² Monuments can either memorialize an event or a person. For example, there are many statues of Christopher Columbus because of his large impact on America. However, he became a subject of deep controversy; many argue Columbus should not be commemorated because of his colonization while others firmly believe he should be honored because of his great achievements. During protests, his statues would be beheaded or pulled down because people viewed Columbus as a symbol of white supremacy. When we turn our attention to the equestrian statue of George Washington, a man who has owned enslaved people, there is a question if he should be memorialized as well.

Upon stepping into the Public Garden in Boston Common at Arlington Street, you are immediately greeted by the beautiful greenery around us. You take a look around, breathe in the fresh air, enjoy the natural surroundings, and lift your head up to face the monument erected for the first president of the United States: George Washington. The equestrian Statue of George Washington, established in 1837, is thirty-eight feet tall in total, thus earning a reputation as one

of the largest statues in Boston. The monument is sculpted in utmost detail which fully encapsulates the importance of one of our Founding Fathers. Dressed in a military uniform and sword unsheathed, he is ready to charge into battle upon his horse.

A symbol for freedom, Washington is a highly respected man and viewed as a hero. His bravery and military prowess is compared to Quinctius Cincinnatus, a Roman statesman and military leader “who chose to peacefully return to his farm after being given complete control over the Roman state rather than remain as a tyrant.” Washington’s reputation and importance is magnificently portrayed through the location, position, and detail in his sculpture. The height of his statue exudes power as he is positioned in the center of the Public Garden. The pathway around him leads straight into the center and incorporates the “Leading Lines” camera technique, thus capturing our full attention. Furthermore, in certain angles, the sunlight is gleaming behind him, highlighting the sculpture’s outline and further implementing his high status.

However, despite the positive commemoration for George Washington, he has become a figure of idolization. We can no longer see him as anything but as a hero who fought in the American Revolution and as our first president; he has become a mythological figure rather than a human. His significant accomplishments have overtaken and overshadowed who he is entirely, and he now represents American values such as patriotism and freedom. In our education system, schools only teach George Washington’s accomplishments and rarely do we acknowledge how he was a slaveholder. Similar to Christopher Columbus, our focus is only on what they have done right, but not what they have done wrong. Washington was involved in slavery all his life as he had inherited 10 enslaved people during a young age after his father’s death and purchased more

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4 Ibid.
as an adult. According to Mary V. Thompson, a historian, she stated, “There wasn’t much evidence prior to the revolution that he ever considered slavery to be wrong,” however, within the Revolutionary War, he began to become enlightened about the wrongness of slavery. Thompson explained that “He’s leading a war where people are saying that people are born free, that freedom is a god-given right. And he's not stupid. He can see the hypocrisy of owning slaves.” Although Washington began to see how cruel slavery was, he still did not free his slaves in 1782. Moreover, Washington would become aggressive towards the enslaved people when he thought they were not working as hard as him. Thompson further explained that there was a record of him “ordering an enslaved man to be whipped for walking on the lawn” and that he would “aggressively [pursue] runaways, and took steps to prevent his enslaved people from being freed accidentally while visiting free states.”

Additionally, Washington believed the solution to the “Indian Problem,” was to encourage Native Americans to assimilate into American culture. Many white settlers perceived Native Americans as aliens and wanted them to give up their homeland to colonizers. By having Native Americans assimilate into American culture, they would be “civilized” and converted to Christianity, learn the English language, and more. According to Colin G. Calloway, the author of The Indian World of George Washington: The First President, the First Americans, and the Birth of the Nation, “Washington believed the government should offer a fair price to Native Americans for their land, and the ‘opportunity’ to embrace ‘American-style civilization.’ If they say no, then [Washington] describes them as recalcitrant savages who need to be ‘extirpated.’”

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
But when a passerby views the monument, because of the way Washington is posed, his facial expression, and how he is dressed, the initial impression is heroism. Furthermore, many school systems do not include the darker aspects of Washington’s life. He holds high value shown by riding on a high horse and the monument’s looming height and is idolized. In our eyes, Washington created the building blocks of America.

Idolization can become extremely overpowering and overwhelming. We must keep in mind who we should look up to, and who we view as an impactful, positive figure in our history. So, is George Washington a figure to be idolized? Should we even idolize people in general? The question is much more complex and difficult to answer. Historical figures we honor and memorialize must not be seen solely through a one dimensional lens. George Washington was not just the first president of the United States, but he was a slave holder. He was not just a Founding Father, but a man who believed that Native Americans should be forcibly assimilated. Idolization is not an evil concept, nor should it be stopped, but when we commemorate someone, we must also acknowledge all sides of the person’s character. We should remember their accomplishments as well as the darker elements of their life.