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WASHINGTON'S GOD: RELIGION, LIBERTY, AND THE FATHER OF OUR COUNTRY

By Michael Novak and Jana Novak

Throughout the twentieth century, biographers have made three general claims about George Washington and his religion. First, Washington was a lukewarm Christian, at best. Second, he was more of a deist than a Christian. Third, his concept of Providence was not really Christian, but more like the Greek or Roman Fate, or *fortuna*. Not true, write AEI scholar Michael Novak and his coauthor and daughter Jana Novak in their new book, *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of Our Country* (Basic Books, 2006). After careful study of George Washington's original writings, letters, speeches, and declarations—along with the help of a few fresh resources—the Novaks conclude that these prevailing assertions are unfounded.

The current attempts to divorce all aspects of religion from the public square would have been unsettling to George Washington. Calling religion and morality “indispensable supports” to political prosperity, our nation's first president repeatedly extolled Americans to promote virtue as “an object of primary importance.” As general of the American army, he hired chaplains and forbade his troops under threat of death to utter blasphemies and profanity. Washington believed the troops needed to live among the people as Christian soldiers and demonstrate the moral character of the American cause.

But was Washington's support for religion and morality merely lip service to the country's religious observers? Did Washington actually adhere to his own exhortations to give thanks to “divine Providence”? Was Washington's God anything more than an impersonal, philosophical deity? These are but a few of the questions that the Novaks attempt to answer in their new book.

Washington came from a long line of vestrymen and even clergy, and Anglicanism was an instructive and shaping force in his life. As an adult, Washington served actively as a vestryman in two parishes, accepted the responsibilities of a godfather on eight occasions, and attended church services more often than many of his contemporaries. Both on the battlefield and in the presidency, Washington set aside time for fasting and prayer.

Though his personal life and private actions displayed a devout and sincere faith, Washington intentionally avoided public discussion into the nature of his faith, precisely because he did not want to turn religion into a partisan matter. Instead, he wanted to

unite the young country's citizens as he had the men of the ragtag colonial army, a diverse mixture of Quakers, Congregationalists, Anglicans, and Baptists. During his presidency, Washington attended numerous religious services while touring the nation, sometimes as many as three in one day.

Washington was not a showy Christian who wore his beliefs on his sleeve; religion was a very private matter for Washington. Yet he considered himself—and was considered by his close family and friends—a devout man of Christian faith.

Michael Novak is the George Frederick Jewett Scholar in Religion, Philosophy, and Public Policy at AEI. He is a former U.S. ambassador and the author of *The Universal Hunger for Liberty* (AEI Press, 2004), the bestselling *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (Madison Books, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1991), and many other books. He lives in Washington, D.C., with his family. **Jana Novak** is a poet and author whose books include *Tell Me Why: A Father Answers His Daughter's Questions about God* (Pocket Books, 1999), coauthored with her father, Michael Novak.

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Advance praise for *Washington's God*:

“How is it possible to reconcile Washington's eloquent words about Providence with the picture that scholars generally paint of him as a man with only a distant interest in religion? Michael and Jana Novak argue persuasively that it is not necessary to square this circle because the scholars are likely wrong. In this thoughtful and enlightening book, they show that Washington's religion was complex and personal, and although he spoke of his beliefs with restraint, so did—and do—many who are nonetheless committed to their faith.”

—Lynne V. Cheney, senior fellow, AEI, author of *A Time for Freedom*
(Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2005)

“*Washington's God*, relying on the great statesman's own words and deeds, persuasively answers the age-old question of who was George Washington's God. Michael and Jana Novak delve beneath the many layers of Washington myths and misconceptions, writing a perceptive, thought-provoking religious biography rich with insights into Washington's views on God, Providence, religious freedom, virtue, and related concerns of faith and character. This is essential reading for students of Washington, his religious beliefs, and the remarkable times in which he lived.”

—Daniel L. Dreisbach, professor, American University, author of
*Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation between Church
and State* (New York University Press, 2003)