

# **Book Review**

*Founding Father*

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Period 1

Review of *Founding Father*  
Brookhiser, Richard. *Founding Father*. New York: Free, 1996.

*Founding Father* is a biography of George Washington written by Richard Brookhiser. He attempts to take George Washington “out of the box” and examine his life and character, digging deeper than the contemporary cliché perception of the first United States president. Brookhiser is a historian and biographer, and a columnist for the New York Observer. He is a Yale University graduate, and also received an honorary degree from Washington College. He first became interested in George Washington from Garry Wills, one of his history professors. In addition to *Founding Father*, Richard Brookhiser has written several other books about various topics and people in United States history and government, and has contributed to other historical projects, such as the PBS documentary *Rediscovering George Washington*. The viewpoint taken in *Founding Father* is biographical, examining all aspects of Washington’s life; the author endeavored to make the book historically accurate.

Brookhiser’s thesis is that Washington is misunderstood, and has been distanced from the American people. He states, “He is in our textbooks and our wallets, but not in our hearts. We have discarded the cherry tree and other tales of Parson Weems, but we have replaced them with little that moves or even informs us” (p. 4-5). Brookhiser tries to bridge the distance by informing us about his character and life. In the introduction, the author describes the Trumbull collection of George Washington paintings at the Yale University Art Gallery, painting by painting, and what each one signifies. Then he goes over several misconceptions and legends about Washington, examining their root and their inaccuracy. Section One analyzes Washington’s participation and actions in the Revolutionary War, Constitutional debates, and his presidency. Section Two tries to depict Washington’s personality, attitudes, and morals, and

describes his physical appearance. The last section talks about why Washington is considered the father of our country, and what that means. Throughout the book he speaks of our distance from the real Washington. He “committed few blunders, and no crimes. He performed every task that came to him, even retirement” (p. 191). “Martyrs become our companions;” says Brookhiser, “they keep us in thrall. When a hero concludes his career and nature concludes his life, we feel excluded” (p. 191). Washington, unlike many other notable figures, simply retired when he was done. Thomas Jefferson wrote that “[Washington’s] character was, in its mass, perfect, in nothing bad, in few points indifferent” (p. 191). Statements such as this attempt to define his greatness, but fail because Washington was “too ordinary.” In addition, he wasn’t very eloquent. These, according to the author, are some of the reasons we are distanced from him.

The book is presented well; the organization is simple and clear. There are five sections, the first is an introduction and the last speaks of Washington’s death. The three middle sections are each divided logically into three sub-sections: Section One, “Career,” has sub-sections entitled “War,” “Constitution,” and “Ideas.” Section Two, “Character,” is divided into “Nature,” “Morals,” and “Ideas.” Section Three, “Founding Father,” has “Fathers,” “Patriarchs and Masters,” and “Father of His Country.” The choice of words reflects a high school or college vocabulary. Many direct quotes from Washington and his contemporaries are used, allowing the reader to verify the conjectures that the author makes. The book is somewhat long (about two hundred pages) but is clear and readable, and some humor is inserted throughout. There are no charts, graphs, or pictures.

*Founding Father* is a good source for historical study of George Washington’s life, and more especially his character. It provides varied viewpoints and explains several common misconceptions about him. The author’s purpose and thesis are clearly defined and help broaden

understanding of the subject. This is a valuable book for someone studying the founding of our country. I would recommend this book, *Founding Father*, by Richard Brookhiser, to anyone with a little time who wants to know more about George Washington.