

# Book Review – “Mr. President”: George Washington and the Making of the Nation’s Highest Office

By Harlow Giles Unger; Da Capo Press; 288 pages

BY JAN TEGLER - FEBRUARY 11, 2014



While George Washington's experiences as a military leader are well known, his two terms as America's first president are less understood. Library of Congress painting by Emanuel Leutze

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As “the father of our country”, George Washington is best remembered for the eight years he spent as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. Widely celebrated as a military leader, his role during another eight years – his two terms as America’s first president – is understood by painfully few of the country’s citizens today.

In “*Mr. President: George Washington and the Making of the Nation’s Highest Office*”, noted author and historian, Harlow Giles Unger, reveals how

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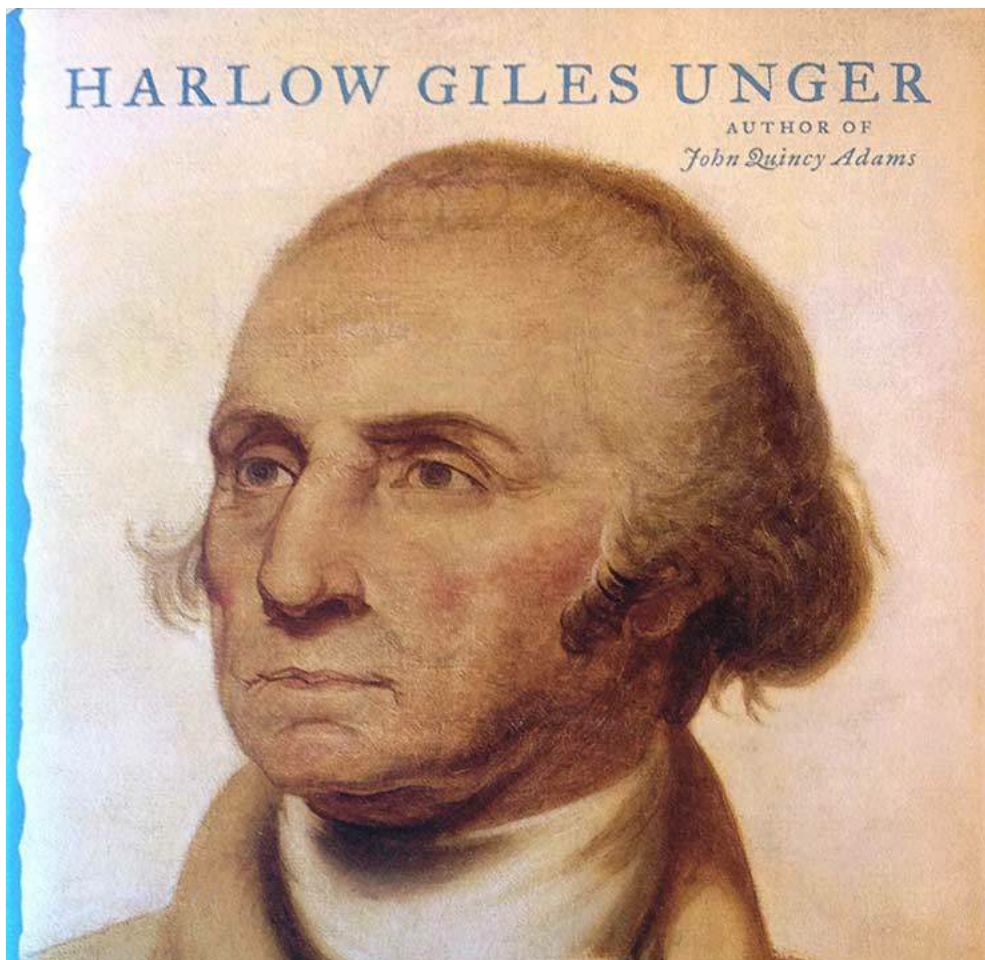
Washington built the powerful structure that has underpinned every one of our nation's chief executives since he left office on March 4, 1797.

“

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In the weeks following his inauguration in New York City on April 29, 1789, President Washington learned just how powerless his new position was. Unger describes Washington's dilemma as the leader of a new nation hobbled by a Constitution crafted by its framers to severely limit his powers in the interest of preventing the president from “metamorphosing into another British-style monarch.”



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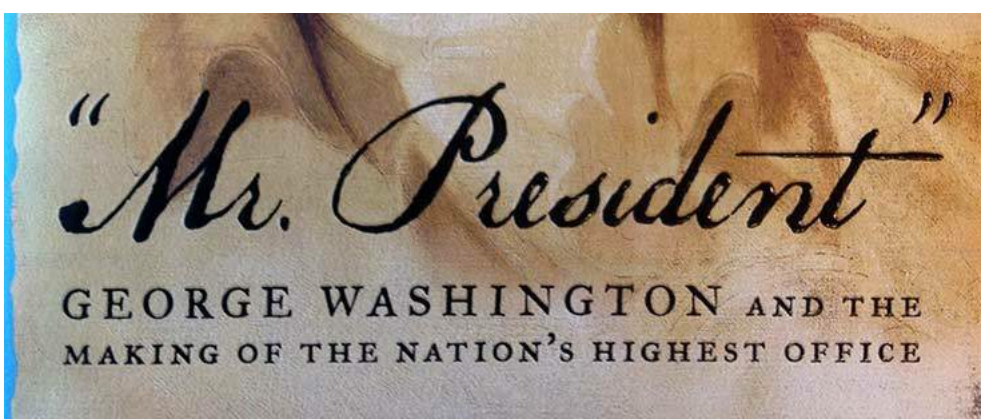
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**"Mr. President": George Washington and the Making of the Nation's Highest Office, by Harlow Giles Unger; Da Capo Press; 288 pages**

Unger writes; "The executive power shall be vested in a president of the United States of America", said the Constitution – without defining or identifying "executive power" or indicating what the President was to do with it other than "execute the office of the president."

Initially, President George Washington had literally nothing to. In the mornings he rode his horse around town and spent afternoons walking from the presidential mansion to the Battery – all this at a time when the United States was little more than a collection of sovereign states with competing agendas and distinctly different points of view on matters ranging from commerce and taxation to foreign policy and slavery.

Under the Articles of Confederation approved by the states in 1777 to provide for their "common defense" the Continental Congress (the forerunner of our federal government) had no powers even to tax the people of the United States for the money needed to feed the armies it fielded.

Without the ability to raise funds the national government was nearly bankrupt, stifling the economy and foreign trade. As Washington took office, foreign debt totaled more than \$11.7 million with domestic debt at \$42.4 million and the "Continental", America's fundamental unit of currency, had collapsed. Revolutionary War veterans due considerable pay at the conflict's end and left with no pension or other recompense for their service threatened a widespread rebellion against the government they had fought to create.

These and other strains including taxation imposed by the fledgling national government (harkening back to the flashpoint of the Revolution itself) threatened to throw the nation into anarchy or civil war. Amid the near chaos, Washington, who had presided over the Constitutional Convention in 1787 that created the new national government under the Constitution – and which upheld strict limits on presidential power – set about casting off the restraints Congress placed on him by raising seven pillars of presidential power.

Employing persuasion, politicking and opportunism, President Washington won the power to "control executive appointments, foreign policy, military affairs, government finances, and federal law enforcement, along with the power to

legislate by presidential proclamation and to issue secret fiats under the cloak of executive privilege.”

The story of how and why George Washington acquired these extra-constitutional powers is the central theme of *“Mr. President”*. Unger weaves together the events and contemporary history that drove the decisions made by George Washington while revealing the character of the man who gave as much of himself to the presidency as he did to his role as the Revolution’s military leader. Importantly, he provides insight into Washington’s reluctance to assume the mantle of power as America’s first elected leader.



After surrendering his commission as commander of the Continental Army in December of 1783, Washington declared that his only wish was to return to his home at **Mount Vernon** to live out his life as a private citizen. But his abiding sense of duty to the people of the new nation he had been instrumental in creating propelled him back to public life.

As Unger explains, both consciously and subconsciously, Washington, like the rest of the nation, realized that he was the only man capable of uniting the country. His belief that a strong central government with the president as the head of government was key to creating – “an indissoluble union of states under one federal head” – was coupled with the very real fear that failure to create such a structure would, as he predicted, “very rapidly tend to anarchy and confusion.”

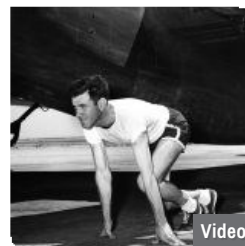
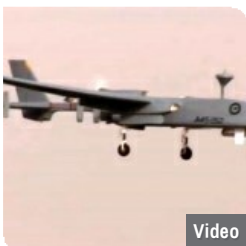
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**Harlow Giles Unger lays bare the debt the nation owes to him – and if this reviewer had the power, “*Mr. President*” would be required reading for every American.**

Washington’s Federalist convictions put him at odds with anti-Federalists in Congress and even within his own cabinet. Unger chronicles the opposition he faced from men who had once been his allies in the Revolution including Patrick Henry and the president’s secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson. The accounts of Jefferson’s actions during this period along with others we’ve read confirm just what a political animal he was, and how deleterious his republic-an views could have been to the country. It’s fair to say that had Jefferson been the first president there would be no United States of America today.

The converse is true of President George Washington. The hero of the Revolutionary War held the union together in its aftermath and created the presidency. Harlow Giles Unger lays bare the debt the nation owes to him – and if this reviewer had the power, “*Mr. President*” would be required reading for every American.

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