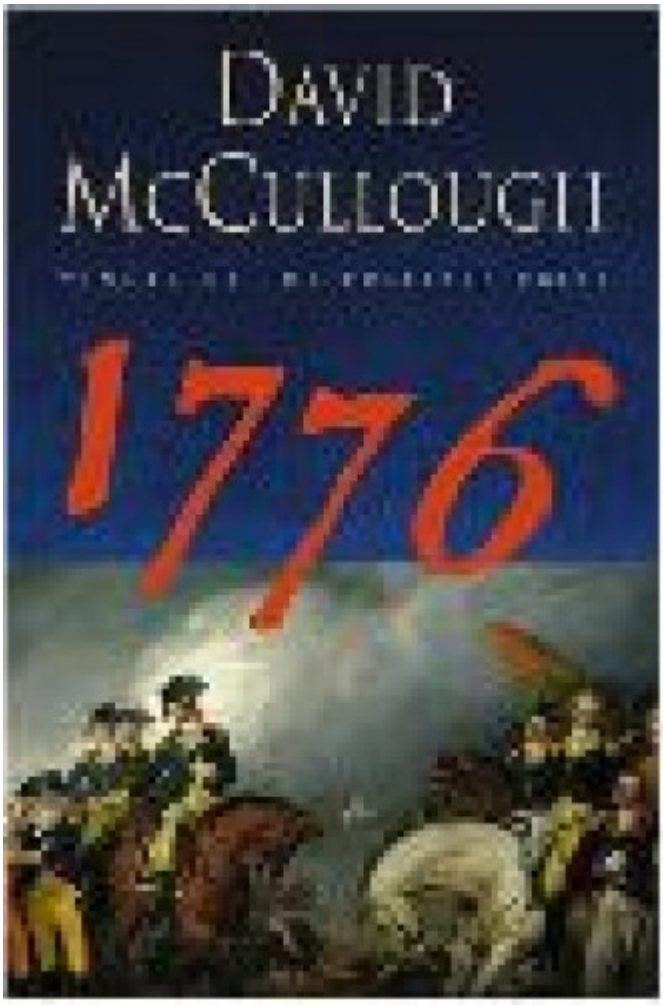
1776/The Grand Idea

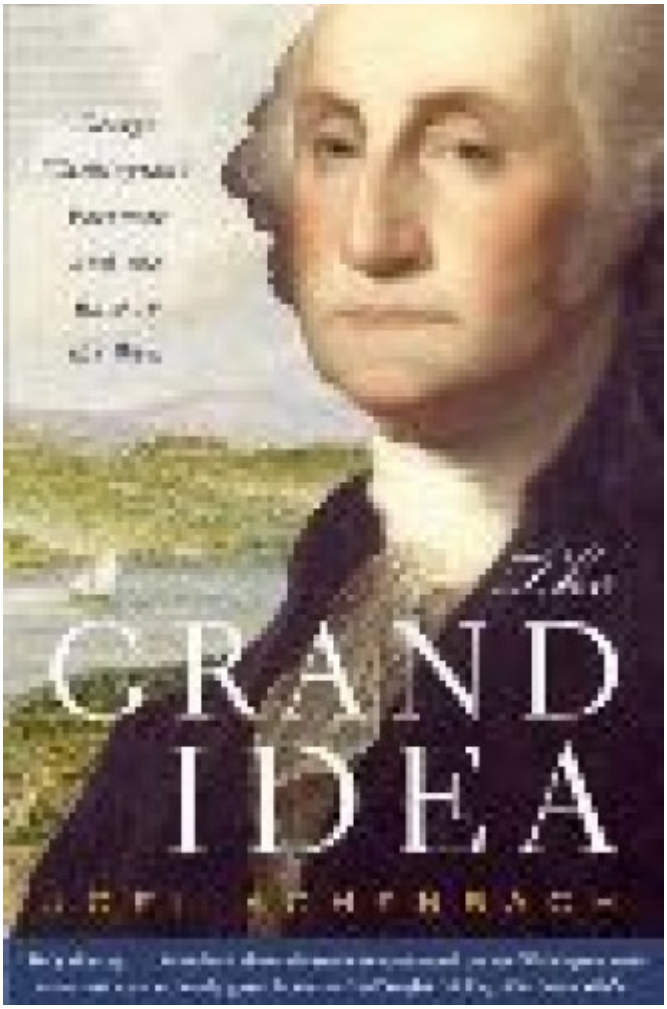
reviewed by Carol Hunter in the January 10, 2006 issue

In Review



1776

David McCullough
Simon & Schuster



The Grand Idea: George Washington's Potomac and the Race to the West

Joel Achenbach
Simon & Schuster

In a time when many cars are sporting bumper stickers with slogans like “Freedom isn’t free” and “If you enjoy freedom, thank a vet,” it is little wonder that authors and readers alike are turning their attention to the founding story of the United States. Prize-winning biographer David McCullough and Joel Achenbach, staff writer for the *Washington Post*, give particular attention to the premier national hero, George Washington.

McCullough focuses on the leadership qualities Washington displayed as he faced his first year of challenges as commander of the revolutionary army. These qualities include the ability to learn from his mistakes and the patience and will to keep

trying. “Without Washington’s leadership and unrelenting perseverance,” McCullough asserts, “the revolution almost certainly would have failed.”

His background as an art historian seems to have given McCullough a wonderful eye for description. He sets scenes with a vividness that makes them come alive, and he captures personalities with apt phrases and well-selected quotes. For example, he writes that Charles James Fox, a member of Parliament who called Lord North a “blundering pilot” and warned that his policies would lose the continent for Britain, was “an unabashed fop, a dandified ‘macaroni’ who at times appeared in high-heeled shoes, each of a different color, and happily spent most nights drinking or gambling away his father’s fortune at London’s best clubs.” The gripping narrative imparts a sense of breathtaking destiny as one follows the decision making of both British and American officers. I highly recommend this book to readers who are looking for an enjoyable page-turner, complete with period maps of the principle battles of 1776.

Achenbach looks at a side of Washington that is less well known than his roles of general and president: his career as a real estate speculator and businessman. He picks up Washington’s story in the years between the Revolution and Washington’s assumption of the presidency. In the Treaty of Paris (1783) Britain had surprisingly given all its land east of the Mississippi River to the former colonies, and Washington worried about how to hold the eastern and western portions of the new nation together. He hoped to do so by linking his beloved Potomac River with rivers on the other side of the eastern continental divide to allow an easy exchange of commerce between the Ohio Valley and the cities of the Atlantic seaboard. Over the years and in the course of numerous trips west in support of this plan, Washington became one of the largest landowners in the country, acquiring more than 49,000 acres scattered across present-day Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

Achenbach portrays Washington as someone with the ability to endure considerable physical discomfort without complaining, a man of single-minded purpose who gave great attention to detail, including the minutiae of careful surveying and the making of weather measurements, and to his own legacy. Calling for his secretary on his deathbed, Achenbach notes, Washington ensured until “his final breath . . . that the documentary record of his life, the proof of his virtue, the evidentiary base of his reputation, would be carefully preserved.” Achenbach suggests that this preoccupation with virtue and reputation may well have been one of the reasons Washington emancipated his slaves in his will.

Although there is a sense of closure at this point of the narrative, Achenbach continues with five more chapters that follow the story of the Potomac into the present. He comes close to making the river, which “could not adapt itself to a business model” (the longer, hand-dug Erie Canal took that honor), the true hero of his narrative.

Both McCullough and Achenbach find Washington to be a compelling figure with a strong sense of rectitude, destiny and vision. Doubtless a nation looking for a sense of virtue and reassurance about its vision finds these qualities compelling. But one of the strengths of McCullough’s book is his development of the British perspective as well as that of the rebels. The book begins and ends with King George III and the contentious discussions in Parliament about the war in the colonies, discussions that include numerous voices, such as that of John Wilkes, lord mayor of London, “champion of the people and the homeliest man in Parliament,” who warned that “the war with ‘our brethren’ in America was ‘unjust, . . . fatal and ruinous to our country.’” Throughout the text McCullough deflects the propensity to see the world in a simplified polarity of good and evil by reminding readers that the British as well as the Americans fought with valor, believed Providence was on their side and sacrificed nobly for their cause.

Historians have long debated and will continue to debate why the mighty British empire was defeated by what British general John Burgoyne called a “rabble in arms.” In the final line of his book, McCullough gives his telling assessment—that “the outcome seemed little short of a miracle.” Whether intentionally or not, he uses a word fraught with associations of God’s divine blessing and intervention. Now that roles have shifted and the U.S. rather than Britain is the world power, we have an opportunity to ask why having the strongest military force in the world is insufficient to ensure a nation’s ability to work its will against small, determined opponent forces—whether they be made up of British colonists, Vietnamese nationals or Iraqi insurgents. This requires a shift in readers’ perspective. The effect of McCullough’s history of the founding period is not to reinforce the nationalism of those who would see the U.S. as God-favored and innocent; rather, it stimulates readers to ask discerning questions about the relationships of states to one another—about when it becomes “necessary to break the political bonds,” about who benefits from war, about what its costs and internal dynamics are, about how power shifts, and about whether and for whom revolution enhances equality and freedom.

Both books are models of description and wordsmithing, and Achenbach writes with wit. (He suggests that Francis Parkman's description of old-growth forest "stretched out like 'moldering reptiles of the primeval world'" could make one "afraid to ever again go near a tree," and he facetiously comments on a squatters' residence named Washington's Bottom, "What an honor.") But they are both short on analysis. By choosing to focus on the military campaigns of 1776, for example, McCullough sidesteps probing the causes of this costly war. He simply makes the terse observation on page seven that "war had come," without any explanation as to why the war came or why it was necessary. He scarcely mentions what was going on in Philadelphia with the Continental Congress except to note several times Washington's sense of duty and his expressions of the need for an army. McCullough also doesn't deal with problems that developed after 1776, including desertion, mutinies against officers, and the extreme measures taken to maintain discipline, including deprivation of soldiers' freedom in the name of fighting for freedom.

Americans commonly link war and freedom, and the conviction that underlies this linkage—that we are free because we fought for our freedom—is reinforced by our holidays, national stories, media, video games and so on. The upsurge in interest in books about the founding period has the potential to reinforce this linkage, but it also has the potential to raise crucial questions: Are we any freer than the Canadians, who didn't fight Britain? Would it have been possible then, and is it possible now, to establish a democracy without war? And what becomes of empires when they fail to seriously consider these questions?