

Bring back Washington's birthday

Somehow we lost perspective about the founding father's enduring greatness



William F.B. O'Reilly

I'm sure James Buchanan had his moments, but truth be told, I'm not planning to celebrate our 15th president on Monday. Not in my heart of hearts.

Ditto for our 17th president, Andrew Johnson. By all accounts, Johnson was a piece of work. When asked to give a speech to commemorate George Washington's 134th birthday, the soon-to-be-impeached Tennessean used the word "I" some 200 times.

That's more "Is" than former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie used while introducing Mitt Romney at the 2012 Republican National Convention. (He used 37 "Is" and 7 "Romneys.")

I can think of seven presidents in my lifetime I don't wish to celebrate this Presidents Day. One of them lives in the town next to mine. I won't name names; doesn't seem neighborly. But it rhymes with Phil Blinton.

I suspect others might feel similarly about a more contemporary figure — even Mr. Blinton. Wild guess.

Presidents Day is America's way of saying everyone gets a trophy. But not all presidents deserve an Oscar or a national holiday. That doesn't mean we're ungrateful for their service. But let's face it, most presidential candidates thrust themselves upon us. They are hardly dragged kicking and screaming into the White House.

Except one. George Washington was. At least into the presidency. There was no White House for him and Martha; if there were one, the Washingtons would have wanted no part of it.

Washington resisted entreaties to serve as president. The hero general of the American Revolution, who held a ragtag army together by sheer force of will for eight years, begged to be left alone in 1789, to live out his days in peace on his Virginia farm.

"I should unfeignedly rejoice," he wrote Alexander Hamilton, "in case the Electors, by giving



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The equestrian statue of George Washington at the Boston Public Garden in Massachusetts.

their votes in favor of some another person, would save me from the dreaded Dilemma of being forced to accept or refuse.

"If that may not be — I am, in the next place, earnestly desirous of searching out the truth, and of knowing whether there does not exist a probability that the government would be just as happily and effectually carried into execution without my aid, as with it."

It was not to be for Washing-

ton the farmer. Washington the president was required. The great man, a member of no political party, took the first presidential oath on the balcony of New York's Federal Hall on April 30, 1789.

"Among the vicissitudes incident to life," he began, with a humility that marked him, "no event could have filled me with greater anxieties than that of which the notification was transmitted by your order . . ."

Washington's most enduring greatness was still to come: After eight years, he announced he wouldn't stand for office a third time. He would voluntarily relinquish power. This was not what one did with power, and the world took notice. America was to be a different kind of nation — one where leaders served the people, not the other way around. That's where the American focus would be, with a peripheral and mindful eye always on the administrators along the Potomac.

Somewhere along the line, that perspective got turned on its head. We became obsessed with presidents (and with Washington itself). Arguing bitterly about the chief executive is now an all-consuming national pastime. We haven't only handed the presidency power over our lives, we've given it power over our spirits.

There is no official Presidents Day in America. It's still on the books as Washington's birthday, as it should be. We didn't celebrate it because Washington was president; we celebrated it because he didn't want to be.

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President Donald Trump gives two thumbs up while playing at his Trump International Golf Club in Florida on Dec. 29.

Thumb-thing wrong with what we think

When I read "One for the thumb," about baseball player Todd Frazier's 2017 thumbs-down rallying cry [Sports, Feb. 8], it reminded me of the observation that if something is said repeatedly, it is believed to be true.

This is evidenced in what is now associated with the thumbs-up signal, compliments of the misconception propagated by Hollywood, following the erroneous belief of someone who did not know his ancient history.

In ancient Rome, when the emperor gave the thumbs-up

signal to the winning gladiator, it meant, "Slit his throat," according to scholar Anthony Corbeill.

Conversely, when the emperor gave a thumbs-down, it meant, "Bury your sword, and let your opponent live."

L. John Friia, Northport

How far will Israel venture into Syria?

For years, Israel has been a proxy supporter of factions aimed at destabilizing Syrian President Bashar Assad ["Israel strikes in Syria," News, Feb. 11].

It is groups including Hezbollah in Syria that Israel has identified as the enemies. We can expect Israel to launch further attacks in Syria, which, along with Iran and Lebanon, is a home to refugees who fled Palestine after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

The bitter fate of a country once as beautiful and multilayered as Syria has been sealed by the destabilizing effect of Israel's dominating and incendiary presence in the region and the radicalization of stateless Palestinian refugees who have found sympathetic hosts in Syria.

The question now is, how far is Israel prepared to go into Syria? This global confrontation looms on the horizon.

Harry Katz, Southold

Get Port Authority money for the LIRR

When the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey decided to declare the Pulaski Skyway a Lincoln Tunnel access road so it could use bi-state funds for its reconstruction, it was a theft of those funds by New Jersey ["Trump plan won't rebuild America,"

Editorial, Feb. 13].

When the Port Authority was created, its rules permitted it to finance access-road projects that lead to the agency's facilities.

Now is the time to recoup those funds. We simply need the resolve to have roads such as the Long Island Expressway declared access roads to the very same Lincoln Tunnel, or the Long Island Rail Road as an access line to trans-Hudson railway tubes.

Problem solved.

Leonard Cohen, Wantagh

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