

BLOOD OF TYRANTS

George Washington and the Forging of the Presidency

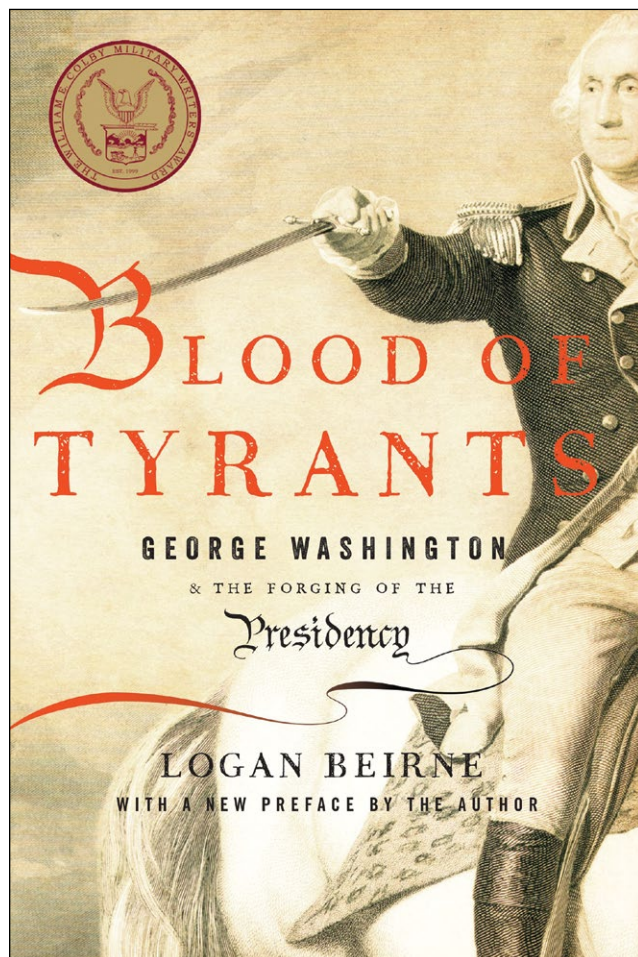
Logan Beirne, Encounter Books, New York, 2013, \$27.99, 420 pages

Lt. Col. Harry C. Garner, U.S.
Army, Retired

In his thought-provoking book *Blood of Tyrants: George Washington and the Forging of the Presidency*, Logan Beirne addresses Washington's approach to four policy dilemmas also faced by post-9/11 presidents: prisoner abuse, congressional war power, military tribunals, and Americans' rights.

In a remarkably well-researched volume, Beirne draws from reams of primary source documents to cast a light on many facts related to Washington that have been largely overlooked by history. In doing so, he strips away the stereotypical facade of the stoic, aloof Washington and depicts instead a passionate and fearless leader devoted to the revolutionary cause. He goes on to portray Washington as an honorable and ethical man who struggled with dilemmas similar to those facing modern presidents. Beirne unveils an uncompromising revolutionary warrior and administrator who was also relentless and, at times, ruthless and savage in what he believed was the defense of American freedom. In doing so, Washington set precedents that define presidential powers today.

Beirne begins the narrative with a concise journey through the crucible of Washington's early military career. He then details Washington's leadership of the



Continental Army during the brutal and messy struggle for independence, at which time Washington drew upon the lessons of past experiences—many bitter—coupled with his own wisdom, to develop principled approaches that are models for today's leaders.

During his narrative, Beirne bluntly addresses the critical questions: "Why should we care about this history? Why is it relevant in today's postmodern era?" His answer is that the Constitution under which we live—the supreme law of the land—was shaped by the events recounted and can only be fully appreciated by understanding the circumstances of the decisions Washington made. For example, Washington's Revolutionary War powers established precedents from which today's presidential powers were derived. Readers are invited to judge for themselves the relevance of Washington's precedents today.

Beirne explores Washington's pragmatic attitude regarding the treatment of enemy combatants. While he freely admits much of the modern world now takes a more humane approach toward prisoners of war, Beirne affirms that presidents still must address fundamental questions: What must be done to defend the American people? How extreme can the measures for defending the people be?

Using historical events supported by official documents and the personal letters of Washington, Beirne clearly outlines the escalating "mistreatment" problem faced by Washington. A highly principled man, Washington abhorred prisoner abuse, but he nevertheless countenanced it as a counterthreat to British abuse of prisoners and civilians. As a result, abuse became a weapon that Washington used to retaliate against British torture and, therefore, he helped prevent harm to his people. It was a horrible, but practical, tool employed by Washington under the assumption that in doing so he was carrying out his foremost obligation to protect Americans and the revolution itself.

While Washington felt little obligation to seek congressional guidance in matters of prisoner treatment, he nevertheless sought to adhere to congressional authority in the execution of the war. Beirne asserts his example became the embodiment of what later would be enshrined in constitutional powers as the duties and prerogatives of the commander in chief.

By exploring the natural distrust and suspicion the populace held for a powerful army in a republic

system of government, Beirne skillfully guides the reader through the tumultuous relationship between Washington and the feebly empowered Continental Congress. He describes the experiment of congressional control over the war efforts during the initial phases of the revolution and Washington's extraordinary effort to adhere to confused, unsynchronized congressional mandates and directives.

Among the many issues with which Washington struggled, the Continental Congress's lack of legislative power to compel states' compliance to national strategic goals made the essential tasks of paying, feeding, and equipping the Continental Army nearly impossible for him. After a series of battlefield defeats, Washington capitalized on the public trust in his personal leadership, impeccable character, and demonstrated loyalty to challenge congressional war authority and to shame Congress into providing support. Nevertheless, Beirne clearly points out that Washington never attempted to usurp congressional authority over civilian matters.

Intent on protecting the republic, this "republican general" purposefully confined the exercise of his powers to control over the military at a vulnerable time when opportunity and temptation provided him ample opportunity and power to do otherwise. In a final, resounding point, Beirne asserts when the framers of the Constitution designated the president as commander in chief, it was clear that Washington's wartime example prompted them to include the broad authority to lead the military in defending the nation, as demonstrated through Washington's battlefield leadership. One of those powers delegated to the military was the authority to direct its own tribunals separate from the authority exercised by Congress over the American people.

Examining another dimension of Washington's leadership, Beirne tells the gripping story of Benedict Arnold's treasonous plot to surrender the American fortress at West Point, New York. In doing so, Beirne places the reader in the center of one of Washington's most serious dilemmas.

Overlapping and contradictory congressional and state laws, as well as international customs that determined "who were subject to military jurisdiction and who came under the cognizance of civil power," created what Washington admitted was a "confused state." Providing a historical overview of the origins, processes, and differences between courts martial and military

commissions and tribunals, the author presents the options available to Washington in his dealings with Arnold's alleged accomplices.

Seething with rage over the trusted Arnold's dastardly deed, and extraordinarily fearful of a deeper plot, Washington sought swift and severe punishment. With revisions to the American Articles of War of 1775, Congress gave the commander in chief the power to try "foreign and American citizens" charged as spies. Joshua Hett Smith, an American citizen, was subsequently tried under courts martial and acquitted of aiding and abetting Arnold. Smith's coconspirator, Capt. John André, a British citizen and officer, did not share the same fate. Under the ad hoc system of a military tribunal, André was sentenced to death by hanging. Drawing from Washington's personal writings, the reader feels his personal anguish and pity for André. However, Beirne is quick to point out that Washington was not being cruel, rather pragmatic. He needed to present a strong front against such treachery in order to win the war. He executed André for the good of the nation.

In yet another relatively unknown dimension of Washington's wartime actions, he ordered the ruthless extermination and annihilation of specified domestic opponents. Beirne exposes his readers to a rarely seen side of Washington as he directs patriot Gen. John Sullivan and 5,000 troops to eradicate the warring Native-American Seneca nation. The narrative thus throws light on the overlooked, often ghastly realities of atrocities committed during the period of frontier warfare.

Beirne then masterfully introduces Washington's final dilemma: preservation of citizens' rights amid a revolution. More distinctly, since the Loyalists were considered American citizens, quashing their rights ran afoul of their republican principles, but suppressing the opposition to the revolution was vital to the very survival of the new nation.

Beirne employs riveting historical accounts of intrigue, including a June 1776 assassination plot against Washington, to illustrate the commander in chief's predicament. This Loyalist scheme, masterminded by Governor William Tyron and New York City Mayor David Mathews, would have jeopardized the entire revolution if successfully accomplished. A third conspirator was Thomas Hickey of Connecticut, a soldier and former guard for Washington. Though scheduled for trial in civilian courts, Tyron and Mathews escaped prosecution. Hickey, tried by military tribunal, was found guilty of treason and became the first American to hang in the name of the Revolution.

This episode defines Washington's enlightened approach to republican justice in times of rebellion. He routinely referred citizens to civilian courts, reinforcing the procedures determined by the civilian government, and let the chips fall where they may. Beirne concludes his commentary in a circuitous manner as he returns to his original premise. The thorny issues Washington confronted and resolved were no different than those faced by presidents today. Precedents he established during war, codified in the Constitution, became the model for subsequent commanders in chief.

Blood of Tyrants: George Washington and the Forging of the Presidency is superbly written. Beirne's carefully selected historical accounts and events come alive with emotion thanks to his wonderfully animated writing style. His inclusion and colorful descriptions of many of Washington's contemporaries and detailed discussions of their motives help create vivid mental images that place the reader alongside Washington as he grapples with these four emerging dilemmas. This book depicts a distinguished leader who struggled with dilemmas comparable to his modern day peers. Today's leaders would be wise to learn still more from Washington. ■

Lt. Col. Harry C. Garner, U.S. Army, Retired, is an assistant professor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff School Intermediate Level Education (ILE) Campus, Fort Belvoir, Virginia. He holds a master's degree in public administration from James Madison University and a B.S. in international relations from the University of Alabama. He is also a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He served in a variety of command and staff positions in the continental United States, Germany, and Bosnia.