

I chose to read Patricia Brady's biography of Martha Washington because she was someone about whom I knew little. Overshadowed by the magnitude of George Washington's image, it seemed that her life had faded into obscurity. I discovered an amazingly determined, vital woman who lived her life to the fullest and contributed immensely to the formation of the United States.

Literature facilitates students' study of a personality, and a time period, and reinforces their understanding of the forces that changed America. When one investigates an era in history, through the lens of people who influenced and were transformed by the events of their lives, it connects us to the past. Patricia Brady's book, Martha Washington: An American Life, provides readers with texture for the political, economic and social realities of 17th century America. Issues such as the high mortality rate of women and children, difficulties of daily life, times of crisis and decision making before and after the Revolutionary War, and the important role of Martha Washington as the equal partner of George Washington, can be explored by reading this wonderful, readable biography. Brady's book allows us to peek into the past and view Martha Washington as an immensely likeable, admirable and courageous woman. No meek, quiet woman in the shadow of George Washington, instead Martha stands out as his support system and best friend, who invents the role of First Lady for all future presidents' wives.

In this biography of Martha Washington, Brady underscores the importance of Martha Washington's life, by defining the events which molded and strengthened her for the demanding life she led. Brady personalizes Martha and George's relationship and emphasizes the importance of Martha's role in establishing our nation. What makes this book so valuable is that it is a very loving summary and analysis, which allows the reader

to relate to the trials and tribulations, as well as the joys, of a woman who was essential to George's life. While she maintained their privacy by destroying all of their personal correspondence, she completely obscured her own role in her husband's life. Brady's book allows one to come away with a deeper understanding of both Martha and the era in which she lived. .With the upcoming presidential election, what better time to examine the role of the First Lady and the precedents set by Martha Washington who had no rule book to follow?

According to Brady, "Not elected, presidents' wives wield tremendous political and social influence, with their unique access to the nation's leader, they are subject to constant scrutiny by allies and enemies, the press, and the general public. Martha Washington's imprint on the position of First Lady has been decisive. She invented the role while confronting with grace its inevitable quandaries, successes, and heartaches. Admired and respected in her lifetime, Martha set the standard for all First Ladies."

Reading this book offers a number of challenging activities for students. For example, students could create timelines, participate in a mock, interactive role play between George and Martha Washington, read primary source documents of Martha's correspondence, investigate milestones of Martha's life and draw conclusions, and compare and contrast the lives and influence of current presidential candidates' wives and that of the 1st First Lady.

I gained many insights into Martha Washington's life, from reading this biography, the first of which is how consistently George confided in her in military, political, economic and personal matters for forty years. For eight years, George stayed in the field with his troops, which is the only way he could hold his army together. Every

winter she joined him, and his rag tag group of soldiers, providing support, love and much needed hands. Martha wrote, “ The General has wrote to me that he cannot come home this winter but as soon as the army under his command goes into winter quarters he will send for me, if he does, I must go.” Brady writes, “Martha Washington was the secret weapon of the American Revolution. She became a motherly figure matching Washington’s patriarchal role- a pleasant, kind woman who visited the hospital (at Valley Forge) and showed ‘motherly care’ for the soldiers, sick and well.” Martha truly “walked the walk,” when she shamed other women, such as Lucy Knox and Rebecca Biddle, to join her in putting aside fancy work in favor of knitting, darning and making shirts for the American soldiers. Martha became part of the effort begun by Esther DeBerdt Reed ,on behalf of poorly supplied soldiers, which raised \$300,000 to purchase linen. A large group of women, led by Sarah Bache, made 2,200 shirts for the soldiers.

The second insight that I gained is how well Martha and George’s marriage would compare to the standards of today, in terms of equality and partnership.

Brady writes, “George was never an overbearing patriarch: he left any decision about where Martha would stay in his absence to her own good judgement.” He considered her a full partner in their relationship. George wrote, “In short my earnest desire is, that you would pursue any Plan that is most likely to produce content.” In fact, George’s cousin Lund Washington, who was devoted to George throughout the Revolutionary War, was unhappy under Martha’s authority and George’s unlimited confidence in her.

Martha, like the wife of a president today, found herself part of the public’s demand for visual symbols of Americana. As Washington became a patriotic icon to Americans seeking a national symbol to replace King George, so Martha set precedents

for future First Ladies. After the inauguration was held, Martha was always “on call.” She had no example to follow as the first First Lady, and had no way of knowing how radically her personal life would be curtailed. This experience would be interesting for students to compare and contrast with 21st century First Ladies. An example of how much Martha’s life was restricted was when the 1st president announced in the newspapers that he and his wife would not attend or host private gatherings in order to avoid any appearance of favoritism.

In the new capitals of New York and Philadelphia, Martha used her charm, humor and social skills shrewdly to help George negotiate the dangerous political waters of the new U.S. She was at his side as political enemies unleashed vicious tabloid newspaper attacks against Washington. As much as George suffered from the Republicans’ newspaper attacks, Martha suffered twice as much for her husband because she was helpless to protect him. How difficult it must have been for both Washingtons to endure the problems that they encountered with the factions led by Hamilton and Jefferson. Students could relate the current climate of politics, and the upcoming election, to the plight of George and Martha Washington. The wives of Washington’s closest advisers became Martha’s friends and loving companions, including Abigail Adams, Betsy Hamilton, Lucy Knox and Sarah Jay. These friendships among the men helped to somewhat smooth the working relationship among the men. Washington and John Adams didn’t care for each other but became tolerant through the social activities of their wives.

Brady writes, “the President was a man of natural dignity and aloofness. As his national stature increased, so did his reserve. Both from inclination and policy, he had created a commanding public presence. Martha was always praised for her easy

friendliness. In many ways Martha humanized the national hero- or rather demonstrated his humanity to those who hadn't seen it."

Another insight which I gained from reading Brady's book, is how courageous a person Martha became. She allowed herself to be inoculated against smallpox, in order to be able to be with her husband. George was a strong advocate of inoculation, despite the risk of death, and he worked hard to create an army safe from smallpox. He doubted Martha's courage to go through inoculation. He wrote to his brother Jack, "Mrs. Washington is still here (NY) and talks of taking the Small Pox, but I doubt her resolution." Fortunately, she was inoculated and it was successful so Martha didn't hide in safety during the war, but was able to travel and stay with George wherever his army was camped.

Brady writes, "Martha was an intelligent and concerned participant who moved along the path toward revolution and nationhood with him. " She read newspapers, magazines and pamphlets and discussed all of the news of the day with her husband. She enjoyed the theater, music, art and dance and visited libraries and museums. Martha led the way for future presidents' wives in being a role model who embraced culture, travel, an American sense of style and fashion, and customs. Clearly she preferred being a hostess at Mt. Vernon, tending to her children and grandchildren, and overseeing a successful plantation. Brady offers many examples of ways in which Martha and George took in indigent, sick, relatives and friends, even raising their grandchildren. Martha participated fully doing whatever work was required without complaint. Martha wrote, "I am still determined to be happy in whatever situation I may be, for I have also learnt from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our disposition

and not upon our circumstances; we carry the seeds of the one, or the other about with us, in our minds, wherever we go.”

In only one area did Martha and George disagree: emancipating their slaves. When Martha’s slave Oney Judge escaped from Philadelphia, Martha cannot understand. “To Martha’ mind, the young woman had no reason to leave; she was a favorite whose workload was light, and she was always treated with affection.” Alone among all the founding fathers, Washington freed his slaves. Martha, who otherwise was so influenced by her husband, never came to agree with his action. Although she didn’t reach Washington’s conclusion that slavery was wrong, Brady argues that she, “was no more likely to argue with him over the disposition of his human property than she was over his decision to leave Mount Vernon to a Washington.” Brady seems almost accepting of Martha’s ownership of human beings, referring to them as servants in this biography.

In conclusion, Brady’s says, “Martha Washington is one of the most recognizable in American history and yet Martha herself is the invisible woman in American history.” Brady’s book allows the reader to unpack Martha Washington and learn about history through the lens of a woman who invented the role of First Lady, and underwent, with grace, courage and unselfishness, all of the demands of her life. Patricia Brady’s book gives valuable insight into the life of this remarkable heroine and leaves one with a sense of appreciation and admiration for this life well lived.

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