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Just a few months ago, David McCullough, the best-selling author of several important biographies of American leaders, remarked to me that “we are raising a generation of historically illiterate children.” These are powerful words and, sadly, they can be supported by a number of recent surveys.

For instance, in a recent survey of fourth graders, seven of ten students thought that Illinois, California or Texas were among the 13 original colonies. Six of ten students had no idea why Pilgrims came to America, and only seven percent could identify what important event occurred in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776.

The news is no more encouraging at the university level. When graduating seniors at the nation's top 55 colleges were asked to name the American general who won the Battle of Yorktown, 34 percent named George Washington. But 37 percent selected Ulysses S. Grant, and six percent chose Douglas MacArthur!

We know that modern textbooks are among the causes of the problem. Some history books include one-tenth the coverage of George Washington that appeared 40 years ago. One particular social studies textbook includes a modest 34 lines on Washington and 213 lines on Marilyn Monroe. Still another devotes four pages to explaining the democratic form of government, while providing 18 pages on socialism and 47 pages on communism.

Recognizing that George Washington was being short-shrifted in the classroom, Mount Vernon educators decided more than a decade ago to fight back. We developed a George Washington Biography Lesson for fifth graders, which now has been sent, at least once, to every fifth-grade classroom in America.

In some states, more than 90 percent of the teachers who received this lesson used its contents in their classrooms. This tells us that most history teachers still believe, as we do, that Washington is a superb example of character and leadership. When given the creative materials they need to transform Washington, the myth, into Washington, the man, teachers rise to the occasion. Starved for legitimate heroes, most of their students welcome Washington with open arms.

Fortunately, the true stories from the life of Washington are far more exciting than any work of fiction. Because Washington was not simply the most important of the founding fathers—he was also the most adventurous, the most athletic, and the most fascinating.

In his teens, he surveyed land on the western frontier that few white settlers had ever seen. In his early twenties, Washington led a small group of soldiers who killed a French diplomat, lighting the fuse which sparked the French and Indian War. By the time he was 23, Washington had been promoted to full colonel—the highest rank a colonist could achieve. The young Washington was courageous to a fault, and he made a number of serious blunders. But the lessons he learned in the French and Indian War would serve him well two decades later, when he became commander in chief of our revolutionary forces.

In the war against England, Washington faced the strongest and best-trained army in the world. At one point, King George III sent to America 35,000 men—a force larger than the entire population of Philadelphia, America's largest city. During certain periods of the war, Washington's army of volunteers dwindled to less than 5,000, yet his determination never wavered. Over a period of eight and a half years, Washington was the only officer who never rested. He returned to Mount Vernon only once, to plan the strategy for Yorktown.

At the close of the war, some of Washington's officers were prepared to overthrow the new civilian government and establish their commander in chief as king. To modern Americans, this sounds far-fetched. But in Washington's day, grabbing power was more the rule than the exception for revolutionary leaders. Julius Caesar and Oliver Cromwell (and in later years, Napoleon Bonaparte and Fidel Castro) rallied the people around the ideals of liberty and freedom, but in the

end, they stepped into the vacuum of power and took total control. But Washington would not follow this course. He convinced his men to support the civilian government, and to underline his point, Washington resigned from the army entirely. Like the classical hero Cincinnatus, he put down his sword and returned to his plow.

When King George III heard this news, he supposedly commented that Washington was the “greatest man on earth.” Just a few years later, a defeated and forlorn Napoleon, not far from death, exclaimed, “They expected me to be another Washington.” Who could possibly live up to this incredibly high standard?

Washington’s retirement was short-lived, of course. He was drafted to serve as President of the Constitutional Convention, where he brokered the compromises required to bring 13 disparate states together. And the office of President of the United States was designed with the knowledge that Washington’s character would establish the precedent for all future executives to follow.

Washington’s critical role in the founding of America requires that his life and legacies be passed on to future generations. But the authors of textbooks, and history teachers in classrooms across the nation, should not look upon this task as a burden or a chore. Washington’s life is full of excitement, intrigue and moments of cliff-hanging suspense. If young Americans think Washington was as boring and sedentary as he may appear on the dollar bill, it certainly is not his fault—it is ours.