

of the Jewish state. It was with the help of these religious extremists that Begin rose to power. Since 1967, Israel has been a house divided, and the Lebanon war of 1982 has, if anything, widened the chasm between the two sides claiming to be the true Zionists.

Israel is still at a crossroads. Will it maintain its "Athenian" character, its openness and pluralism, despite pressures that make life in the Levant seem like that in 17th-century Germany during the Thirty Years' War? Or will it succumb to those pressures and become a closed Middle Eastern "Sparta"? Despite the shifts deplored in Rubinstein's book, Israel remains an open society, searching for a sense of itself and holding, however precariously, to the ideals of its initial dream. Rubinstein's book bears testimony to that search.

—Shlomo Avineri

**CINCINNATUS:**  
**George Washington**  
**and the Enlightenment**  
 by Garry Wills  
 Doubleday, 1984  
 272 pp. \$18.95

Garry Wills is an honorable representative of a vanishing species, the American man of letters. Now a professor of history at Northwestern, he prepared for his avocation as a social critic at William F. Buckley's *National Review*. His prose sometimes shows the legacy: a tendency to substitute a sneer for a critique or a parade of erudition for a convincing argument. But Wills's best books have transcended those lapses. In *Inventing America*

(1978), by rediscovering the importance of 18th-century moral philosophy to the Declaration of Independence, Wills demonstrated that Thomas Jefferson and his contemporaries were concerned with communal welfare as well as with individual rights. And in *Nixon Agonistes* (1979), Wills shot from the hip and nailed a moving target. At his best, Wills's learning is solid, his range wide.

In many ways, *Cincinnatus* represents Wills at his best. He deftly explores the relationship between George Washington's public career and popular representations of it. In fact and myth, Washington *became* Cincinnatus—the Roman farmer who left his plow to lead the Republic in an hour of crisis, returning to private life as soon as the peril was ended. In Wills's hands, the image of Cincinnatus also illuminates early American attitudes toward power and morality.

The key was self-restraint, and Washington epitomized it at every turn of his career. The haste with which he resigned his commission at the end of the War of Independence first linked Washington to the Cincinnatus myth; the reluctance with which he returned in 1788 to public life as President reinforced the popular impression. From his resignation in 1783 to the Farewell Address in September 1796, Washington "had to use power most adroitly in order to give it up in useful ways." Unlike other more charismatic American leaders, he could relinquish power gracefully because he believed in what Wills calls the "republican ideology"; it in-

cluded a "vision of emergency powers given to some worthy man, who proves his worthiness by refusing to exercise the powers beyond the emergency's demands." The early American Republic's central tenet: Power is most usefully exercised when it is most carefully contained.

Wills draws on a wide variety of sources to demonstrate his point. He examines the shift from Biblical to classical republican imagery in the cult of George Washington, showing how Parson Weems's homiletic *Life of Washington* (1800), the source of the famous cherry tree story, emphasized the Founding Father's simple virtues and eclipsed such lumbering epics as Timothy Dwight's *Conquest of Canaan* (1785), which depicted Washington as a latter-day Moses. Wills contrasts the popular failure of Horatio Greenough's statue—a grandiose and bare-chested Zeus (completed during John Tyler's administration and installed in the Capitol Rotunda)—with the success of Jean-Antoine Houdon's earlier statue in Richmond (1788). The latter presented what Wills describes as a "spiritual 'striptease' in which the emblems of power are being removed one by one." The great leader in Houdon's work is shown putting aside the Roman fasces and preparing to return to the plow—a triumph of restraint over pomp.

For all its virtues, *Cincinnatus* is hobbled by Wills's one-sided view of the historical process. Great men and great ideas march in procession across the stage of history; the importance of changes in popular thinking or of underlying economic arrangements is largely ignored or dismissed. For example, an emphasis on the "enlightened" outlook of Washington and the other leaders of his generation leads Wills to exaggerate the secular cast of the Revolutionary era. The United States may have been "the world's first truly secular state," but the process of nation building involved more than the stately march to independence led by Washington; it also required a widespread popular movement to rid the land of British "luxury" and "corruption." And that movement was fired by evangelical Protestantism. As historian Rhys Isaac has demonstrated in *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (1982), even Washington's home state, once the bastion of the "established" Anglican Church, had been thoroughly evangelized by the time Washington took office. Focusing on the great men, Wills overlooks the popular evangelical currents that influenced the emerging civil religion.

Wills's approach also obscures the contradictions between republican reverence for simplicity of life and the nation's developing capitalist economy. American republicans, including Washington and Jefferson, viewed the independent yeoman as the ideal "economic man." Concerned about "the vices of commerce," they warned against the growing concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. They held up "public virtue" as an antidote to the lust for private gain that seemed to be engulfing the infant republic. Yet they exemplified the virtues of self-control and disciplined achievement that were well suited to the accumulation of capital.

Despite its flaws, *Cincinnatus* remains an elegant and compelling book. It describes the meaning of Washington's career to his own contemporaries and explains it to us. Amid the current celebration of power-getting and private gain, Wills recalls America's early public ideals.

—T. J. Jackson Lears '83