

Introduction

In the mid-1840s, a full-length portrait of François Guizot by George Healy¹ could be admired in the Library of Congress in Washington. Guizot was the French Minister of Foreign Affairs when he posed for the young painter who, in 1841, was just 28 years old. The painting was, however, more a celebration of the eminent historian than of the statesman, and in fact it was Guizot as a historian in particular circumstances. Here was not the famous historian of the English Revolution, nor of the European or French civilizations, all subjects to which he had devoted many and sizeable volumes between 1825 and 1830. Here was instead the author of a very short book, even a pamphlet covering only one period—the foundation of the American Republic—and just one man—George Washington. As he later confessed in his memoirs, both were subjects Guizot had discovered at the time of his research and writing².

This portrait is part of a story. On 1 February 1841, twenty-five American citizens residing in Paris had written a letter to Guizot, asking him to sit with an American painter for a portrait that would then be sent to the Presidents of the Congress to be placed in their library. This would be a token of their gratitude for having made known to Europe "the true nature of our Revolution and the characteristic superiority of its hero". And so it was. In return, Healy offered Guizot his own beautifully executed copy of Gilbert Stuart's great portrait of Washington, which was then hung where he had written this text, at Val Richer, Guizot's country residence near Lisieux in Normandy.

Jared Sparks was the third signatory of this letter. Born in 1789, this Unitarian pastor, a former editor of the *North American Review* and later a history professor at Harvard, was a library and archive connoisseur in the United States and in Europe at the time, who had impressive publications to his credit. He had undertaken to produce *The Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution* in twelve volumes and had also published between 1834 and 1837, *The Life and Writings of George Washington*, also in twelve volumes. For this project, he had drawn upon the 200 volumes of manuscripts bequeathed by the first president of the United States to his nephew Bushrod Washington. Congress later purchased these volumes to deposit in the state archives in Washington D.C.; he also studied other public and private archives—including those in Paris. In 1838, Jared Sparks had the idea of asking Guizot to choose some elements from this monumental work that would be "likely to

¹ This painting is now at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington DC.

² *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de mon temps*, Paris, Michel Lévy, vol. 4, 1861, p. 316.

interest the French public, and to oversee its translation and publication". An introduction specifically for this audience was also needed. Guizot agreed to take on these tasks.

Why Guizot? Sparks could have turned to Alexis de Tocqueville with whom he had been in correspondence after having met him in Paris in 1828, and again in Boston in September 1831. Moreover, Tocqueville's knowledge of America was firmly established since the publication of the first volume of *Democracy in America* in 1835, a work that was received favorably in France, England, and the United States. However, it was likely that Guizot's notoriety, both political and intellectual, was much greater in the eyes of the American publishers. Tocqueville was just beginning his career as a man of letters, and had not yet embraced that of politics. Washington had taken office in April 1789 and so the American Republic was then fifty years old, as was Guizot. Perhaps his character as a Protestant also meant in the eyes of Reverend Sparks that he would be capable of grasping the Anglo-American mentality—as he then amply proved.

In addition, the proposal had arrived at just the right moment. In 1838, after having excelled at the Ministry of Education for nearly five years Guizot, the deputy of Calvados and one of the founders of the Monarchy of July, had been out of the government for one year. He was not a man to remain inactive, and at the same time he was too busy to resume his projects on the English revolution and the history of France and he knew he would be called upon to return to office in the near future. He was therefore available for a job of a certain size, a project that would be neither overwhelming nor lengthy.

An agreement was reached with the Parisian bookseller Charles Gosselin, also Tocqueville's publisher, for the publication of six volumes. The choice of excerpts and their translation spanned the first three quarters of 1839, and Guizot wrote his *Essay on the Character and Influence of Washington in the Revolution of the United States of America* in about six weeks at the end of the summer. The work appeared in bookstores in the early days of 1840, before the same publisher published the introduction in a smaller format, under the simple title *Washington* in 1842. Meanwhile, the book had been translated into English by Henry Reeve, who was Tocqueville's translator as well, and was sold in the United Kingdom and the United States. The reception was generally warm, even enthusiastic—Americans were happy to see their hero and the historic event he embodied honored by a great European. On their side, the French were able to discover a man and an event through a different perspective than

in the stories of La Fayette who had died six years earlier—even though Guizot had also granted La Fayette an important role in his writings.

Washington represents a departure in the life work of Guizot. The biographical genre was not what he preferred and no biographies appear among the works that earned him fame, even if he had in fact written a few, at times for circumstantial reasons. Indeed, the conception and practice of history that he had not continued to develop since his inaugural lecture at the Faculty of Letters in December 1812, the role of the "great man" was not regarded as decisive. The course of events was dependent upon a completely different logic, called "fatalistic" at the time, summarized in 1823 in Guizot's *Essays on the History of France* as such: "Events are greater than men know and those that seem to be the work of an accident, of an individual, of particular interests, or of some external circumstance, have much deeper sources and a much different bearing."

As Madame de Stael wrote at the beginning of her book whose influence was considerable on the post-revolutionary generation, *Considerations on the Principal Causes of the French Revolution*, we must not mistake the actors for the play, or in other words, the effect for the cause. Guizot wrote: "Great men have the monopoly of history. This is one of the main causes of its shortcomings and errors (...) The real public story is that of men who have no history³." Without denying them "the slightest part of their position and their glory," the historian, whom the politician rejoins, measures them sparingly. The proper use of great men in history is thus to be considered with caution. Guizot explains this in his course on the history of civilization in France, taught in 1829-30⁴, developing an astonishing parallel between Charlemagne and Napoleon, the latter's destiny then on all minds.

In these two cases and many others, the life path of the great man, seen through his activities and his role, can be divided into two parts. In the first part of his life, the great man shows a more perspicacious understanding than others at the time about what his society needs in order to develop, and through his authority and abilities, he manages to form and direct social forces in this direction. He is then followed by the greatest number, which serves as the basis of his glory. But in a second phase, he leaves this reality behind and becomes consumed by personal ambition and intrigues. One therefore follows him for some time on this adventurous and often warlike path in the first part of his life, but then becomes wary or tired, and abandons him in this second period and he

³ *Etudes biographiques sur la Révolution d'Angleterre*, Paris, Didier, 1851, pp. 259-260.

⁴ *Histoire de la civilisation en France*, édition définitive, Paris, Didier, 1857, t. 2, pp. 114-119.

falls from grace: "And then all of the purely personal and arbitrary aspects of his work fall with him." Thus fell the Carolingian and the French empires, one thousand years apart.

Oliver Cromwell, no doubt the great man in which Guizot had the most interest, also fell from grace in this way. Guizot had been impressed by his baroque genius, his mixture of common sense and impassive daring, mixing truth and lies, and finding himself for some time to be "a player as cautious as he was frantic," but in the end he tried in vain to restore what he had destroyed, the monarchical government: "the greater his situation became, the greater his ambition grew, which therefore took him above his situation."⁵ William III of Orange, succeeded in 1688 where Cromwell had failed thirty years earlier. On a smaller scale he had "a glorious mixture of skill and faith, ambition and dedication⁶." In the eyes of history and posterity, he deserved to be a quasi-great man due to his renewal of a constitutional monarchy that then remained in force. However, he lacked that moral elevation that would have placed him in the constellation of Guizot's esteem. In truth, just one man was completely great to him, and that was George Washington.

Everything about Washington spoke of a great man—the general, the president, and simply his very person. He was great because he showed himself to be prepared for the circumstances of all situations and he fulfilled exactly the work that the course of history had demanded of him without being neither inferior to this role nor above it. Of the two periods of greatness, he therefore lived only the first, retiring when the work for which he judged himself fit was accomplished, a step that none of the few great men before nor after him had ever taken. More than any other, he was one of the "representatives of those sovereign crises that determined the fate of nations⁷." This was because, as Guizot shows, he was provided with precisely the qualities that were necessary and sufficient for his task: "Neither his thoughts nor his passions were great in themselves and separate from events, "and so he escaped from the hubris that lies in waiting for the victorious leader once delivered to his own mind and his own feelings. "But in action, his judgment was infallible, his soul very firm and superior through its serenity and disinterestedness⁸." Through many vicissitudes, he led the aspiring nation that had surrendered its destiny to him as to a safe haven, for it was obvious even at the time that he was the only one to be able to do so. Guizot grants Washington to be a kind of

⁵ *Discours sur l'histoire de la Révolution d'Angleterre* (1850). Paris, Robert Laffont, 1997, éd. Laurent Theis, p. 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

exception that further enhances his merit and declares the decisive role of great men—or at least this one in this instance: "To him [Washington], and to some men who were with him, America deserved its independence (...) I do not know of any great event that would retain its greatness and its moral sense if two or three men, sometimes only one, were removed from it⁹."

The English Revolution had had its great men: Cromwell, who began it, and William III, who concluded it. That was its good luck. The French Revolution, to which Guizot would naturally refer when writing about Washington and many other subjects, did not. Mirabeau might have been the man of the hour, but he was taken away and the French revolution failed. But the American revolution? In truth, there was not, strictly speaking, an American "revolution" according to Guizot, who rarely uses this term. The United States "did not attempt a revolution (...) There was no old social order to fear, to hate and to destroy (...) No struggle between the various classes (...) There was no more a revolution in souls than there was in society¹⁰", in which the religious spirit did not prevail. And that is why democracy, in its republican form, was established in America without the convulsions, violence, and anarchy which, in Guizot's mind, necessarily came with democracy in Europe. This could be so because democracy remained limited to its only legitimate claim: civil equality in which no privilege of birth or condition exists, in which everyone is placed in a similar position before taxes, and in which equal access to public functions is open to all. This is not, however, the democracy that indiscriminately hands to the masses, if necessary by force, the conduct of affairs and the governing of the state, which would then be subject to the vagaries of ignorant and unstable opinions. Social and political democracy are distinct. Washington was spontaneously carried towards the first, although "without a taste for it nor for democratic disorder¹¹." But, "when it came to the organization of the government, he was opposed to local and popular pretensions, a declared partisan of the unity and strength of central power¹²." On this point, Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of State for the Treasury and an unjustly unknown personality in Europe, was a valuable ally through his conviction that the fate of the new nation should be entrusted to a sort of functionary aristocracy in the framework of a centralized government. Democracy was thus made acceptable and practiced, because "it takes two things for democracy to endure and succeed; it must feel loved and

⁸ Letter to Laure Gasparin dated 12 August 1839.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Discours sur l'histoire de la Révolution d'Angleterre, op. cit.*, pp. 72-73.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

restrained, and it must believe in the sincere devotion and moral superiority of its leaders¹³." For Guizot, in America as elsewhere, authority must come from above. It was on this subject that Tocqueville and Guizot would have to contend with each other.

It would be questionable to assert that Guizot's biographical essay on Washington was a direct response to Volume One of *Democracy in America*, published in 1835. Just as dubious would be a claim that it would be an anticipated reaction to Volume Two that had already been announced for some time and that would appear in April 1840 just three months after *Washington* and from the same publisher. We can just barely discern an allusion to Tocqueville's work when Guizot wonders about the destiny of the United States after the triumph of the democratic party and the arrival of Jefferson in 1801, events reinforced by the double mandate of the more radical Andrew Jackson between 1829 and 1837. He writes: "Immense questions: difficult to solve, if I'm not mistaken, for nationals; impossible, for sure, for a foreigner." The foreigner might well be Tocqueville, the new deputy of Valognes, elected in March 1839, who was no stranger to Guizot. A diligent and admiring listener in his course on modern history, Tocqueville had met the famous history professor at the beginning of 1830.

Ten years later, their relations remained in good standing, and on May 2, 1840, he was able to write to Lord Radnor that he had "the honor of knowing M. Guizot quite well". He had naturally sent a copy of the second volume of *Democracy in America* to Guizot, declaring to him that "in all the political and literary world there is not a single man whose judgment matters to me more than yours." Guizot replied kindly and at length: "Democracy needs friends like you. It would be a sad spectacle to see the maxims that are specifically designed to elevate the whole of humanity to bring about its debasement (...) I have faith that it will not come to that, but it will be necessary to take a great, great deal of care. Because the slope downwards is very easy, and the means for keeping on the slope very weak. You are among those who are dedicated to this very hard work." And Guizot regrets that Tocqueville did not further develop "the democratic status of the United States, and the role played by Christian beliefs in society and in souls." Finally, to conclude he writes: "I think a lot about you, sometimes with worry¹⁴." Guizot was right to be concerned: his former disciple joined a weak opposition in France at the

¹² *Washington*, p. 80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

¹⁴ The letter by Tocqueville is dated 26 April 1840, that of Guizot May 8 from London where he was then Ambassador I thank Madame Françoise Mélonio, an eminent Tocqueville specialist for having kindly shared these two documents with me.

end of 1840 when he became Minister of Foreign Affairs thus taking the reins of government for the first time, but then he entered into a more open opposition as of 1842 and expressed his distance from the political leaders of the time, noting that "the liberal but non-revolutionary party that would be the only one that would suit me, does not exist"¹⁵. It is regrettable that he did not seek to create it, but this was not in his temperament.

Tocqueville's views with regard to democracy, in America and elsewhere, differ from those of Guizot in that he believes that power comes from below, and that it is from the people that the government draws its legitimacy: "The people reign over the American political world as God over the universe¹⁶." On the contrary, for Guizot, elsewhere and within the Republic of the United States as the founding fathers had intended, it was up to the rulers, these "superior men" that are so designated by their abilities and their social situation to be recognized and accepted by what he calls, not without a touch of reticence "the masses". He writes about Hamilton for instance: "His superiority was to know that naturally and by the essential law of things, power is at the top, at the head of society, that it must be constituted according to this law, and that any system, any contrary effort, sooner or later brings about trouble and weakening in the society itself." Basically, Tocqueville foresaw and announced the growing and inescapable penetration of the masses into the movement of society. He did so without joy, because his roots and his inclinations attracted him to the aristocracy. Guizot on the other hand, rejected and refused this, judging that the July revolution in which he played an important part, which was both censorial and meritocratic, had reached a point of equilibrium between social democracy and political democracy, granting each its fair share. In this debate, Tocqueville was considered to be he who was conquered by history, as his former master, endowed with a beautiful energy, wrote to him in a famous letter: "I find in your book the same character that struck me in your great work on the United States of America. You paint and you judge modern democracy as a vanquished aristocrat convinced that his victor is right¹⁷." Charles de Remusat, giving an account of Guizot's book, attempted a synthesis: "Perhaps, some day, we will have to admire only the masses; while there is still time, let us give ourselves the pleasure of admiring a great man¹⁸." Would Guizot thus propose an ideal that had perhaps become

¹⁵ Letter to Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard dated 27 September 1841.

¹⁶ *Democracy in America*, vol. 1 Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1993, p. 120.

¹⁷ Letter to Tocqueville on 30 June 1856, about *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*.

¹⁸ In the *Revue des Deux-Mondes*, January to March 1840, republished in *Passé et Présent*, Paris, Ladrance, 1847, t. 2, p. 150-151. In this insightful article, Rémusat announces the important book that Tocqueville would soon publish.

inaccessible, while Tocqueville described social reality in process of maturation¹⁹? The fact remains that the free government to which they both aspired and to which they both separately sought the best path, remained their common goal. On January 24, 1861, Guizot was able to present an intellectual portrait of Tocqueville before the famous French Academy upon the succession of Henri Lacordaire, a former opponent, to Tocqueville's seat (after his premature death from tuberculosis). One could say that his sketch of his former student was vastly superior in quality to that of Lacordaire: "Modern democracy has found in him a free and fair observer, deeply touched by its merits and rights, but enlightened about its flaws and perils. (...) In describing democracy in America, he took great care to highlight the good fortune the country had encountered thus far, and the dangers the country still bore within in the midst of the prodigious success already achieved. It is the original character of his work that it is neither a plea for democracy, nor an indictment against it, nor an attempt at an indiscreet appropriation." And in conclusion he added: "What Mr. de Tocqueville wished for and what he sought for our country I wanted too, I was seeking it as he was. We had the same love for public liberties and the institutions that founded them, inspired by very similar ideas and feelings²⁰." Tocqueville was no longer there to qualify the terms of this appropriation which appeared, to many listeners, as a victory of the elder over the younger.

Guizot not only appropriated his former confrere at the Institute. He was also and first and foremost appropriating the American Revolution in the bourgeois version that he presented, and especially his representation of Washington himself: "The more I became engrossed in the study of the event and of the man, the more I felt both interested and enlightened, as much for my public life as for my individual thought. I went back and forth again and again from France to America and from America to France²¹." As for public life, he recognized the common aspiration of the two societies to achieve political freedom, and thanks to Washington, the foundation of "free government through order and peace at the end of the revolution²²" corresponds almost to the letter to the program of the July Monarchy. Did he not repaint the American revolution in the colors of Orleanism? This is what one attentive reader believed, General Lewis Cass, former Secretary of State for War under President Jackson and United States ambassador to Paris as of 1836. The editors of Gosselin, the publisher of these six volumes testified their gratitude for Cass's

¹⁹ See Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville*, Paris, Fayard, 2008, pp. 355-366. This work offers a substantial analysis of intellectual ties between Guizot and Tocqueville, pp. 338-389.

²⁰ *Discours académiques*, Paris, Didier, 1861, pp. 112-113 et 118.

²¹ *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de mon temps*, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

support for the publication. Cass, while acknowledging "the very beautiful and powerful writing²³" of Guizot's introduction explains that his "great mistake, common to all Europe", was to assign too much of a role to Washington, and an overly insignificant role to the mass of the population in the great political drama that was played out. "Our social organization," Cass laments, "is an enigma to the old world." As a conservative, Guizot saw in the American Revolution only a simple and natural change of political institutions, a conservative revolution of freedoms as in 1830. And Cass, in support of his argument, quotes an article on Guizot's *Washington* published by the publicist Léon Faucher, the future authoritative Minister of the Interior of the Second Republic, in the *Courier Français*. Faucher, all the while recognizing the merits of the book, also believed that the social dimension of the American Revolution did not receive sufficient attention—in particular the humiliation felt by the population regarding the treatment inflicted upon the colonies by England, which played a decisive role in triggering the event.

In fact, Guizot had sought and found many elements of rapprochement between Washington's approach and that of the rulers of the French constitutional monarchy, which were elements of a controlled revolution. In a letter to La Fayette, had not Washington expressed his attachment to a "middle ground" policy? The expression could not have found a better echo for those who were already putting this forward, and who would even make it a slogan and rallying cry. In his *Memoirs*, Guizot drove home this thought, remembering how in 1839 he had been "charmed to discover an evident analogy between the policy of Washington in the nascent government of the United States and that which my friends and I had promoted since 1830²⁴." Had not Washington done "the two greatest things in politics that man may have the chance to attempt? He maintained, in peace, the independence of his country (...) [and] he founded a free government in the name of principles of order by reestablishing their influence²⁵. What Guizot wrote in September 1839, he would indeed attempt from October 1840 to February 1848 as the chief minister of King Louis-Philippe. In his efforts, however, he was certainly less fortunate than the first president of the United States.

Guizot was able to seek in the personality of Washington an anticipated reflection of himself, to say nothing of the private virtues of the great man. On this point the parallel can only remain discrete and implicit, he

²² *Washington*, p. 122.

²³ In his book, *France, its King, Court, and Government, by an American*, published anonymously in June 1840 in New York at Wiley & Putnam, pp. 44-49 are dedicated to the work of Guizot.

²⁴ *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de mon temps, op. cit.*, p. 323.

insists on traits of character and behavior that he elsewhere willingly recognizes in himself. Does he write of Washington, or himself in describing accounts such as this: "When he had observed, reflected and decided upon his idea, nothing disturbed him; he did not allow himself to be thrown off or kept on, neither by the ideas of others, nor by the desire for approval, nor by the fear of contradiction in a state of continual doubt and fluctuation²⁶." Or this : "He had that rare courage to cling firmly to a view, and to accept, without complaint, the imperfections and inconveniences of success²⁷." And he declares that he is grateful to Washington for confirming what he himself asserted, to believe that "when we are right, we can succeed²⁸," echoing his own formula: "when we are right, we are even more right than we think."

Thus, Washington, during these few weeks, was for François Guizot "a healthy friendship that relaxes and strengthens, like all true cordials²⁹". This also gives food for thought on the foundations and conditions of the exercise of democracy such as posited and proposed by the United States of America, and such as confronted by contemporary societies. One hundred and seventy-five years later, while two of the largest democracies of the world, the United States and France, are electing new presidents; this friendship, we believe, has not outlived its use.

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²⁵ *Washington*, p. 121.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

²⁸ Letter to the Princess of Lieven on 20 August 1839.

²⁹ Letter to Laure de Gasparin on 26 August 1839.