

George Washington and Frederick the Great: Parallel Lives

By Jürgen Overhoff

Princeton University Press, 2026.

Pp. xxi, 317. \$35 hardcover.

In *The Theory of Economic Development: An Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle* (Harvard University Press, 1934), the economist Joseph Schumpeter described what has become the canonical theory of innovation in the field of economics. Innovation is the carrying out of new combinations of existing resources, such as the introduction of a new product in the market. Schumpeter's combinatorial theory of innovation has since been recognized as a much broader theory of creativity beyond just the context of economics. Indeed, I teach Schumpeter's combinatorial theory every year to a group of undergraduate honors thesis students as a model for scholarship and how to come up with new ideas of their own. Of course, the mere combination of two ideas, two datasets, two models, or two whatevers does not guarantee successful innovation, but combinations are the root of all successful innovation.

And, so, it was with great delight and anticipation that I noticed the recent translation into English and publication of the historian Jürgen Overhoff's *George Washington and Frederick the Great: Parallel Lives*. "Delight and anticipation" because like most American readers I have had a long fascination with George Washington. Unlike most American readers, however, I have had an equally long fascination with Frederick the Great. The shelves of my library sag more under the weight of Washington, it is true, but Frederick does his fair share of bending. Never before, however, have these two towering figures of the eighteenth century—the Age of Enlightenment—been given a book length treatment of comparative history. Overhoff's book then is truly innovative, which was another source of my delight and anticipation. But, a successful innovation? I say yes, even though I have my criticisms.

Overhoff begins his book by explaining why the lives of George Washington and Frederick the Great lend themselves to comparative study in the first place. The two figures had much in common, including emotional distress early in life; the design of their country estates of Mount Vernon and Sanssouci; their use of slaves to perform daily tasks; their tolerance of other religions; their belief in predestination; their powers of perseverance and courage in the face of seemingly impossible odds, especially during the American Revolution and the Seven Years' War; their executive management over disparate territories, the newly created states in the case of Washington and the realms of the House of Hohenzollern in the case of Frederick; their participation in the Enlightenment, especially as it pertained to new and evolving theories and practices of government; their love of greyhounds, of all things (indeed, Bruno Frank's novel *The Days of the King* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1927) uses Frederick's greyhounds as a major plot device); their devotion to learning and books; and much more.

Yet the parallel lives of Washington and Frederick the Great have never been compared in a book length treatment. Overhoff explains why their comparison promises to be so informative (p. 9): "For despite their many arresting similarities, Frederick and Washington understood themselves to be the leading representatives of two highly disparate forms of rational political enlightenment: the 'top-down,' absolutist, monarchical type in Prussia and the 'bottom-up,' democratic, parliamentary version in America." Moreover, Overhoff continues, they understood each other this way, thus understanding the political significance of each other's lives and the

threat each posed to the other. This would ultimately lead Washington and Frederick to condemn each other's approach to governance.

As the subtitle suggests, Overhoff's book is written in the spirit of Plutarch. It begins with the older figure—in this case, Frederick—and weaves in Washington's life when the time comes. Overhoff's parallel lives, however, are described within the appropriate historical context: the origin stories of Prussia and the United States; the main features of the intellectual history of the Age of Enlightenment, particularly those pertaining to the two aforementioned approaches to government; and the transatlantic connections between Prussia, colonial America, and eventually the United States.

After describing his motivation and outlining his method, Overhoff spends Chapter Two describing both the intellectual origins of the two approaches of government George Washington and Frederick the Great would practice and come to represent and the historical origins of the places where they would govern. The Enlightenment gave birth to two competing models of states, one represented by Gottfried Leibniz and his advocacy of enlightened princely rule (top-down) and the other represented by John Locke and his advocacy of rule by the people (bottom-up). Both figures took Thomas Hobbes as their starting point but took their ideas in different directions. Prussia (Frederick the Great) would come to embody Leibniz's top-down approach, whereas the United States (George Washington) would embody Locke's bottom-up approach.

Overhoff describes the history of the founding of the Kingdom of Prussia by the Hohenzollerns and the establishment of Pennsylvania's constitution to provide the historical context for the emergence of the two approaches. Overhoff chooses to describe the origins of Pennsylvania, as opposed to Virginia, because he argues the Pennsylvanian constitution was the most exemplary example of Locke's bottom-up approach to emerge around the same time as the founding of the Kingdom of Prussia. I suspect most readers will have a similar reaction as me, however, and wonder why the author does not focus on the history of Virginia, as this is obviously the most important place geographically for Washington's life. Even if the reader eventually comes to accept what Overhoff is trying to do by using the Pennsylvania context, it never ceases to be a strange narrative choice. This is a flaw in the book that could easily have been fixed by writing on Virginia and using Pennsylvania whenever further context was necessary.

The majority of the book, which unfolds over the next eight chapters, consists of a straight forward narrative of the parallel lives of Frederick the Great and George Washington. The author periodically takes time to note Frederick and Washington's approaches to government, including their thoughts on the two competing models, and their views on the Enlightenment generally. This is perhaps best explored through Frederick's famous correspondence and relationship with Voltaire. Voltaire more than any other figure in Frederick's life challenged his ideas and pushed him in the direction of enlightenment, albeit of the absolutism variety, as Frederick never relinquished his position on the role the sovereign—him—should play in directing the lives of his subjects. The reader learns of Frederick's relative tolerance of religion and the press and his reforms of the judicial system, for example, counterbalanced by his heavy-handed mercantilism in shaping the direction of the Prussian economy. Meanwhile, the reader visits Washington in his study as he engages with the Enlightenment literature coming out of Great Britain, such as that published in Joseph Addison's newspaper *The Spectator*. This reading would help shape Washington's views on representative government. Addison's play *Cato*, which made a deep impression on Washington and was highly influential among the Founding Fathers more generally, dramatized the Roman senator

Cato's struggle against Julius Caesar during the dying days of the Roman Republic. Cato as one of the world's foremost examples of republican virtue would in the minds of future Americans be replaced by Washington himself. Washington's refusal to don the purple cloth after the end of the Revolutionary War allowed the emergence of republican government and remains to this day the greatest act of statesmanship in American history.

The eight chapters making up the majority of the book span a little more than two hundred pages, which means the reader is treated to a concise biography of each person. Less than ten pages each, for example, are devoted to Frederick the Great's campaigns during the Seven Years' War and George Washington's presidency. The Battle of Rossbach is mentioned once in Chapter One and then a second time jointly with the Battle of Leuthen in a single sentence in Chapter Seven. The reader has no idea that Rossbach and Leuthen rank among the greatest achievements of Frederick's life and solidified his "the Great" for all time. I mention this omission from the book in particular, because it relates to an important under-explored dimension to the competing models of Frederick's and Washington's approaches, namely whether Frederick's approach may have in fact been optimal for Prussia at the time (to be clear, Overhoff acknowledges this point (p. 165), but the theme remains under-explored). It is hard to imagine the survival of Prussia in its form at the time had Frederick had to deal with the same challenges Washington faced in raising money and troops via the Continental Congress during the American Revolution. Moreover, the fractured nature of Prussian lands under Frederick and the fact that those lands were surrounded by potential hostile powers—France, Austria, Russia, and Sweden—on all sides meant that Prussia was constantly under threat of invasion. These circumstances can be true even if Overhoff rightly casts Frederick as the aggressor in, for example, the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Year's War. Likewise, Washington's experience with the Continental Congress during the American Revolution influenced his views on the need for a strong executive branch of government within the new constitutional order that was to emerge after the war's end.

Overhoff includes a brief epilogue arguing that the comparison between Frederick's and Washington's approaches to government remains instructive for us today, especially since we live in a world where authoritarianism and democratic government coexist and compete with one another both within and across countries. I would have appreciated a longer final chapter summing up and comparing Frederick's and Washington's approaches and views on government and how they evolved over time. The book ends with Washington's farewell address and his warnings against authoritarian government.

Overall, Overhoff has written a wonderful book about two extraordinary figures in history. The book earns high marks for its innovative approach. American readers, in particular, now gain a different way of thinking about their indispensable Founding Father. Washington was the one Founder capable of choosing Frederick the Great's path of enlightened absolutism, which would have murdered republican government in its cradle. He—Washington the Great—chose otherwise. We would do well to head his example.

John T. Dalton
Wake Forest University