

The Humble Patriot: Arnold Friberg's Examination of the Burden of Leadership

BY ALEXANDER STARR

"The reflection upon my situation, & that of this army, produces many an uneasy hour when all around me are wrapped in sleep. Few people know the Predicament we are in... I have often thought, how much happier I should have been, if, instead of accepting of a command under such circumstances I had taken my musket upon my shoulder & entered [sic] the ranks... If I shall be able to rise superior to these, and many other difficulties, which might be innumrated [sic], I shall most religiously believe that the finger of Providence is in it..."

- General George Washington,
Letter to Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Reed, January 14th, 1776

In the early 1970s Arnold Friberg had achieved more career successes than most artists could ever hope to attain. He had been instrumental in the creation of a major motion picture, gained a serious international following for his paintings depicting the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, was commissioned by Chevrolet to immortalize climactic moments in the history of American football for a national ad campaign, and single-handedly developed the visual language and pictorial tradition of religious art for followers of the Mormon religion. Friberg was at the height of his abilities while, at the same time, his beloved country was experiencing one of its most profound social crises to date. The intense struggles of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, coupled with the deeply unpopular enactment of selective service for the war in Vietnam left many Americans, especially of the younger generation, disillusioned with the ideas of patriotism and national service forged by America's founders. Friberg recalls returning from his visit to Valley Forge in February 1975 and experiencing firsthand this "...time of rebellious cynicism. Some students were loudly deriding the upcoming birthday of George Washington... They had no appreciation for what he'd done."

At that time Friberg had already begun researching and devising the painting that would become his magnum opus, *The Prayer at Valley Forge*, and this experience hardened his resolve to create an image that could revitalize public appreciation for the arduous struggle for freedom. The next year, in 1976, the United States would be celebrating the bicentennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and Friberg planned to unveil his painting of Washington to coincide with this important anniversary.



The Prayer at Valley Forge

Friberg was not alone in preparing for this momentous occasion, as other artists, corporate brands, governmental agencies, and local communities throughout the country planned to celebrate this moment with a host of festivals and events adorned with patriotic imagery. The focus of these grand displays would be the monumental triumphs and treasured rewards of independence, but little attention would be paid to the extreme sacrifices and bleak moments suffered on the road to freedom. Moreover, most patriotic artwork made in the centuries following the American Revolution similarly place a great emphasis on the legendary achievements of America's founders through idealized forms. A notable example of this tradition is Emanuel Leutze's striking composition, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, which was painted in 1850. In this work, Washington and his men are stalwart and determined as they navigate giant blocks of ice and a strong headwind while making their way to the Eastern bank of the river. The soldier's garments are all rendered in pristine condition, their bare hands smooth and unsoiled as they pull at the rough wooden oars. Leutze expertly captures the perilous ice and deep water, but Washington and his men are unphased by the surrounding conditions as they make their way to destiny. Friberg was well aware of this tradition, but his admiration for Washington and the other early leaders of the country lay in their ability to find strength and composure in what was, in reality, a mostly bleak situation that required strenuous effort to hold the country together in its nascent moments.



Washington Crossing the Delaware by Emanuel Leutze

While working on *The Ten Commandments*, DeMille shared with Friberg his fascination with the loneliness of leadership, remarking, "Imagine the loneliness of Moses leading the Israelites into the wilderness, with all those people dependent on him." The inscribed quote at the beginning of this essay was written by General Washington a full two years before the events of Valley Forge, showing that Washington was already feeling DeMille's "loneliness" after only a few months as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. With this sentiment in mind, Friberg endeavored to capture Washington in what is often regarded as the darkest hour of the American Revolution. Washington's army had suffered three consecutive defeats at Brandywine, Paoli, and Germantown, losing control of the fledgling nation's capital, Philadelphia, in the process, and now would spend a long, cold winter in the barren forest at Valley Forge. In *The Prayer at Valley Forge*, Friberg conveys the stark reality of Washington's isolation at this pivotal moment. This man, not yet the legendary general of mythical proportions often portrayed in patriotic scenes, kneels in solemn prayer for guidance and strength. The cold air is palpable in the composition. The skin on



Washington's hands and face is cracked and dry, his fingers a bulging scarlet as he clasps them tightly with resolve. Meanwhile, a solitary beam of celestial light provides a brief respite of warmth as it breaks through the dark arboreal thicket that surrounds him, illuminating the almost audible breath of his famous mount as he exhales softly into the cold. Friberg utilizes the skills he developed from his work with religious imagery to tenderly convey the spiritual energy filling the composition, while offering this grand gesture to his fellow citizens that they might find a renewed sense of strength and patriotic purpose.

Friberg's composition was met with massive acclaim when he unveiled it to the public, and it has maintained a significant place in the history of American patriotic art since that time. During



the presidency of Ronald Reagan, a copy of the painting hung in the Whitehouse for all eight years, and the imagery of Washington at prayer was referenced multiple times in Reagan's presidential addresses. In his Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1986, Reagan famously said of Friberg's masterpiece, "One of the most inspiring portrayals of American history is that of George Washington on his knees in the snow at Valley Forge." Ultimately, *The Prayer at Valley Forge* stands as a testament to Friberg's sincere patriotic sentiments and his career-long commitment to revealing the spiritual energy of the world around him.