



The Impossible Dream of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Ben Franklin and Alexander Hamilton.

September 17, 1787: When George Washington saw the Constitution of the United States of America finally adopted after four months of intense debate in Philadelphia's Pennsylvania State House, he immediately went to a bookseller and paid 22 shillings, six pence for a copy of *Don Quixote de La Mancha*.¹

According to MountVernon.org, "this seventeenth-century Spanish allegory does seem a somewhat unusual choice for the pragmatic farmer, soldier, and statesman. An explanation for the apparently uncharacteristic purchase can be found within Washington's correspondence."²

We'll look at that correspondence in a moment, but I believe a statement made by screenwriter Aaron Sorkin offers an equally insightful glimpse into the mind of George Washington in that historic moment when the Constitution was complete and our Great American Experiment had begun.

"I tend to write very romantically and idealistically. So the characters that I write are going to be, kind of, quixotic. And they're going to fail a lot and fall a lot. But, you know, there's a romance in trying for honorable things."³

– Aaron Sorkin, June 29, 2015

Don Quixote had been a topic of conversation a few evenings earlier in the home of Benjamin Franklin. We know this because on November 9th, 1787, Washington received a Spanish copy of *Don Quixote* from Spanish Ambassador Diego Maria de Gardoqui with a note, "requesting you wou'd accept & give a place in your Library to the last Spanish Edition of Don Quixote which I recolectt to have hear'd you say at Dr Franklin's that you had never seen it. I cou'd have wish'd it was in English for your particular entertainment, but it being reckoned the very best Edition of that celebrated work & one in which every thing has been manufacture in Spain induces me to request your acceptance." ⁴

We don't know why they were talking about Quixote that night in the home of Benjamin Franklin, but Indy Beagle tells me it went something like this:

WASHINGTON: "We are drawing near to an agreement. I believe we may a have a Constitution within the week."

FRANKLIN: [shaking his head slowly as gazes down absently at the table]
"I look at the future and wonder if we are victorious champions of the good, or bumbling fools who have convinced themselves they are something they are not."

SPANISH AMBASSADOR GARDOQUI: [smiling] "You have read the *Quixote*?"

FRANKLIN: [nods yes and smiles a weak smile.]

WASHINGTON: "Although Jefferson and Adams speak continuously of this book, I cannot say I have read it."

"Roy," you're thinking, "are you seriously expecting me to believe that our founding fathers were Quixote nuts like you?"

The Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia at Monticello.org says, "*Don Quixote* was one of the few works of fiction that Thomas Jefferson was clearly partial to. He used the text in its original language to learn Spanish, and had his children do the same. Jefferson owned a number of different editions over his lifetime." ⁵

Monticello.org also lists 18 pieces of Jefferson's personal correspondence in which Quixote is mentioned during the 51 years from 1771 to 1822. ⁵

So, yes, when a person speaks and writes about Don Quixote for 51 years, I usually print that person's name in large letters in the "Quixote Nut" column.

These are the big ideas presented in *Don Quixote*:

1. A beautiful dream is worth believing in, even when others think you are crazy.
2. A beautiful dream is worth fighting for, even when you lose.
3. A beautiful dream is worth pursuing, even if it never comes true.
4. The possibility remains that your beautiful dream might turn out to be folly. ⁶

John Adams was Thomas Jefferson's friend and nemesis and he was obsessed with Quixote as well. In David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize-winning book on Adams ⁷ we read, "Another child, Thomas Boylston, was born in September of 1772, and again Adams was off on the 'vagabond life' of the circuit, carrying a copy of *Don Quixote* in his saddlebag and writing Abigail sometimes as many as three letters a day."

Alexander Hamilton's copy of *Don Quixote* was published in Amsterdam in 1755 by Arkstee et Merkus.⁸ In his letter to Rufus King, dated February 21, 1795, he wrote, "To see the character of the government and the country so sported with—exposed to so indelible a blot—puts my heart to the torture. Am I, then, more of an American than those who drew their first breath on American ground? Or what is it that thus torments me at a circumstance so calmly viewed by almost everybody else? Am I a fool—a romantic Quixote—or is there a constitutional defect in the American mind?"⁹

David Brooks is a political and cultural commentator who writes for *The New York Times*. Aaron Sorkin is a screenwriter. His films include *A Few Good Men*, *The American President*, *Charlie Wilson's War*, *The Social Network*, *Moneyball* and *Steve Jobs*. His television series include *The West Wing*, *Sports Night*, *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom*.

BROOKS: "Okay, I am struck by the deep American-ness of this hour. It's a country of energy and ambition and I mean even Walter ¹⁰ has in his biography of Franklin this discussion how ambivalent we are about ambition and there is the ambition of him [Franklin,] there is the ambition of Lincoln but then I think through your characters – whether a Zuckerberg, Billy Beane, Jobs, Charlie Wilson – there are people with outlandish ambitions, out of proportion to what might be expected of them in their role?"

SORKIN: "Yeah. Again I just find that very romantic."

BROOKS: "Yeah."

SORKIN: "And it all goes back to Don Quixote. This guy who felt like he was living in a world that was just a little – had gone over the edge of incivility and crudeness – and he was a scrawny old man who was experiencing dementia and he decided that you can be a knight if you just behave like one."³

A scrawny old man decided that you can be a knight if you just behave like one.

You can be a knight if you just behave like one.

If you just behave like one.

Roy H. Williams

¹ "Don Quixote," The Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington, accessed August 27, 2016, <http://www.mountvernon.org/digital-encyclopedia/article/don-quixote#>.

² "Don Quixote," The Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington, accessed August 27, 2016, <http://www.mountvernon.org/digital-encyclopedia/article/don-quixote#>.

³ The Aspen Ideas Festival, 2015 "What's Character Got to Do With It?", Hotel Jerome, Aspen, Colorado, Monday, June 29, 2015. Transcript accessed August 29, 2016, <https://www.aspenideas.org/sites/default/files/transcripts/2015-Transcript-What's-Character-Got-to-Do-with-It.pdf>

- ⁴ “To George Washington from Gardoqui, 9 November 1787,” Founders Online, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-05-02-0386>. [Original source: The Papers of George Washington, Confederation Series, vol. 5, 1 February 1787–31 December 1787, ed. W. W. Abbot. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997, pp. 419–420.]
- ⁵ “Don Quixote (novel),” Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia, accessed August 27, 2016, <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/don-quixote-novel>
- ⁶ The idea of a beautiful dream turning out to be folly, though clearly evident throughout Don Quixote, did not originate with Cervantes but with Solomon in the Bible’s book of *Ecclesiastes*.
- ⁷ John Adams, by David McCullough, Simon & Schuster, (2002)
- ⁸ Granger Historical Picture Archive, "Alexander Hamilton's copy of 'Don Quixote de la Mancha,' published in 1755, opened to the title page and a portrait of the author, Miguel de Cervantes." accessed August 27, 2016, <https://www.granger.com/results.asp?inline=true&image=0115410&wwwflag=4&itemx=1>
- ⁹ Alexander Hamilton, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (Federal Edition) (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904). In 12 vols. Vol. 10. <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1387>
- ¹⁰ Benjamin Franklin: An American Life, by Walter Isaacson. Simon & Schuster (2004)