

Large Government Programs and Program Management in the U.S.

A Historical Perspective

JOHN E. CAREY

What Department of Defense instructors don't teach aspiring program managers at the Defense Systems Management College is almost as important as what they do teach. Generally, students leave understanding that they are in for many challenges. What few understand, until much later in life, is that the record of managing large government programs in the United States is filled with stories of cost overruns, delays, fired contractors, false starts, and changed objectives. My favorite "case study" is the story of the Washington Monument.

The first idea of a monument to honor the father of the nation emerged in 1783 when Congress resolved "That an equestrian statue of General Washington be erected at the palace where the residence of Congress shall be established." (Congress was meeting in Princeton, N.J., at the time.) A modern program manager would call this legislation the start of an Operational Requirements Document (ORD).

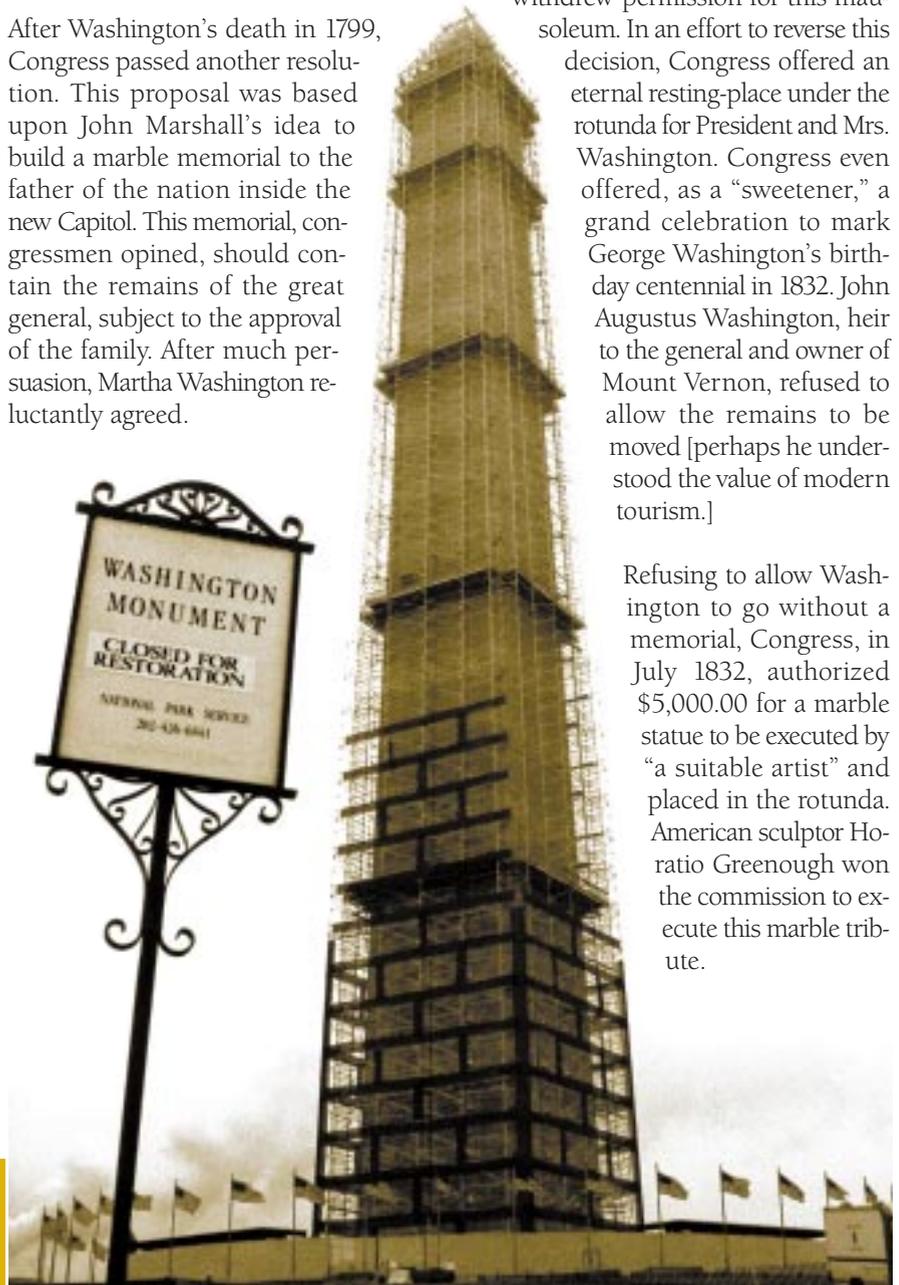
Later, when Congress selected the swampy banks of the Potomac just north of Alexandria, Va., as the new seat of government, city planner Pierre L'Enfant and President Washington chose a suitable site for this planned statue. Lack of funds forced the first delay in the project. After site selection, nothing hap-

pened [an environmental impact statement wasn't even required].

After Washington's death in 1799, Congress passed another resolution. This proposal was based upon John Marshall's idea to build a marble memorial to the father of the nation inside the new Capitol. This memorial, congressmen opined, should contain the remains of the great general, subject to the approval of the family. After much persuasion, Martha Washington reluctantly agreed.

After decades of congressional debate, and Martha's death, Washington's heirs withdrew permission for this mausoleum. In an effort to reverse this decision, Congress offered an eternal resting-place under the rotunda for President and Mrs. Washington. Congress even offered, as a "sweetener," a grand celebration to mark George Washington's birthday centennial in 1832. John Augustus Washington, heir to the general and owner of Mount Vernon, refused to allow the remains to be moved [perhaps he understood the value of modern tourism.]

Refusing to allow Washington to go without a memorial, Congress, in July 1832, authorized \$5,000.00 for a marble statue to be executed by "a suitable artist" and placed in the rotunda. American sculptor Horatio Greenough won the commission to execute this marble tribute.



RECENT PHOTO OF THE WASHINGTON MONUMENT, CURRENTLY UNDERGOING RENOVATION.

DoD photo by C. Tyler Jones

Carey is a technical director at Techmatics in Arlington, Va. He is a 1981 graduate of DSMC's former Program Management Course.

Greenough's classical training resulted in a seated, bare-chested, toga-draped Washington of mythic proportions. Today, program managers would say, "the contractor deviated too far from spec."

When Greenough's Washington was unveiled in 1841, a shocked public and Congress rejected the monument. Most rejected the notion of the father of the nation about to enter a bath. Congress decided it was inappropriate for display in the Capitol. The statue was banished to the Smithsonian — where you can see it today.

Fortunately, a civic movement was starting, which advocated a towering obelisk to honor Washington. This group evolved into the Washington National Monument Society. George Marshall, partly in frustration over previous memorial attempts, agreed to become the Society's first president. Former President James Madison succeeded him.

Some will say because a society of "civilians" managed the project at this point, no comparison can be made to modern government program management — think again.

The project was a "teaming" of several civil engineering firms, and a series of program managers and staff who frequently rotated to new assignments. Sound like your program?

By 1836, 53 years after initial site selection, the society had collected \$28,000 in contributions. The cost estimate for the project at the time was \$1 million.

Nonetheless American architects were invited to submit design proposals [probably a lesson learned from the Greenough fiasco]. Well-known architect Robert Mills won the contest. Having already designed and supervised construction of a smaller obelisk honoring Washington in Baltimore, Mills proposed to evolve this design for the grander venue of the nation's capital.

But Mills couldn't resist the opportunity to embellish upon his already proven design. He wanted to add, around the base

of the obelisk, a circular colonnaded Greek temple 100 feet high. Behind each column he planned a statue of a great American. Above the central portico he wanted a colossal toga-clad Washington driving a chariot pulled by Arabian horses. Today we'd call this "gold plating"

Lack of funds [and probably some good taste on the part of the society] forced Mills to scale back his plan. In 1848 construction began. The cornerstone was laid on the Fourth of July, amid a grand spectacle. The *National Intelligencer* reported, "Few left the city, while great multitudes rushed into it The spectacle was beautiful to behold."

The July 4, 1848 ceremony undoubtedly started the tradition that still exists today. On July 4, 1850, while sitting through a number of lengthy speeches in sweltering heat at the base of the unfinished monument, President Zachary Taylor became ill and died five days later.

Construction progress was slow but steady. By 1852 the monument reached the 152-foot mark. At that point, a treasured gift from Pope Pious IX, a slab of marble from the Temple of Concord in Rome, was stolen. This turned out to be a program manager's nightmare — a political act of terrorism carried out by the "Know Nothings," who actively campaigned against Catholics in particular and all "foreigners" in general.

In 1853, through an illegal election, the "Know Nothings" gained control of the Monument Society. Soon after, however, the lawful patrons of Washington's monument regained control of the project.

As the Civil War began, work on the monument trickled to a stop. After reaching 156 feet, the stumpy monument stood for 16 years as an unfinished reminder of good intentions, bad politics, and mixed management.

As the nation's centennial neared, Congress passed and President Grant signed a law providing government funding to complete and care for the Washington Monument. Before construction con-

tinued, the Army Corps of Engineers discovered that the foundation would not support the estimated weight of the structure — thus commenced a yearlong project of rebuilding the foundation.

Engineers also discovered that the original design would not have formed an obelisk at all — but a square shaft with a marked point. The dimensions of the design had to be adjusted to conform to classical-obelisk dimensions.

By the end of 1883 the monument had reached the 410-foot mark, and the push for the top commenced. Completed in 1884, exactly 101 years after the first steps were taken on the project, a monument to the nation's first president graced the skyline. The exact amount of the cost overruns is difficult to determine — but is certainly large.

With scaffolding covering the monument, the story continues today as the long-awaited and delayed restoration and repair effort gets underway. Most of the funding is from private sources.

Next time you hear someone complain that "it is costing too much and taking too long" or griping about a program manager, remember the Washington Monument. To this day, it remains there for a reason: Even at the expense of cost overruns, false starts, delays, "terrorism," or changed objectives, some projects are worth seeing through to completion, regardless of the cost.

Author's Note: After distributing this article to several experienced historians and program managers, we learned that several famous U. S. building programs suffered from delays, cost overruns, and management irregularities. The U.S. Capitol, Kennedy Center, and the new Ronald Reagan Federal Building are just a few of the more interesting program management "case studies." I am told the dome of the chapel bearing John Paul Jones' remains at the U.S. Naval Academy was originally designed as a red terra cotta dome. The roof leaked, which necessitated a change to the metal dome we see today.