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American Statesman: The Enduring Relevance of George Washington

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George Washington was by all accounts “the indispensable man” of the American Founding. He was the military commander who led a ragtag Continental army to victory against the strongest and best trained military force in the world. Crucial to the success of the Constitutional Convention, his personal support of the new Constitution, more than anything else, assured its final approval. His election to the presidency—the office having been designed with him in mind—was essential to the establishment of the new nation.

“Be assured,” James Monroe reminded Thomas Jefferson, “his influence carried this government.”¹

A soldier by profession and a surveyor by trade, Washington was first and foremost a man of action. He never learned a foreign language or traveled abroad, and he never wrote a political tract or a philosophical treatise on politics. Like Abraham Lincoln, Washington had received little formal education. And yet his words, thoughts, and deeds as a military commander, a President, and a patriotic leader make him one of the greatest statesmen—perhaps the greatest statesman—in our history.

Life

Born in Virginia in 1732, the descendant of English farmers, young Washington learned the surveying trade and traveled extensively in the area west of the Appalachian Mountains. At just 21, he was appointed a major in the Virginia militia. Later, as a lieutenant colonel, he was sent to the Ohio Valley to challenge a French expedition; the resulting skirmishes marked the opening battles of the French and Indian War.

After resigning from the British military, he served as a volunteer

aide-de-camp to Major General Edward Braddock. In 1755, he was appointed colonel and commander in chief of Virginia’s forces, which made him the highest-ranking American military officer, and for the next three years, he struggled with the endless problems of frontier defense.

From 1758 to 1774, he was a member of the House of Burgesses, the lower chamber of the Virginia legislature. In 1769, he introduced a series of resolutions (drafted by his colleague George Mason) denying the right of the British Parliament to tax the colonists, and in 1774, he introduced the Fairfax Resolves, which closed Virginia’s trade with Britain.

He was elected to the First Continental Congress and spent the winter of 1774 organizing militia companies in Virginia; he attended the Second Continental Congress in military uniform. In 1775, just after the battles of Lexington and Concord, he was appointed general and commander in chief of the Continental army.

For the next eight and a half years, Washington led the colonial army through the rigors of war, from the daring attack on Trenton

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Born

February 22, 1732, near Popes Creek, Westmoreland County, Virginia; first child of Augustine Washington (landowner, part owner of an ironworks, and county justice of the peace) and Mary Ball [Washington].

Childhood

Attended local schools but received little formal education; farmed his father's land; trained and worked as a surveyor.

Religion

Episcopalian

Family

At the age of 26, married Martha Dandridge Custis on January 6, 1759; fathered no children but raised two of Martha's children from her previous marriage (John Parke Custis and Martha Parke Custis) and two step grandchildren (George Washington Parke Custis and Eleanor Parke Custis) as his own.

Highlights

Surveyor of Culpeper County, Virginia (1749-1750).
Major, Southern District, Virginia militia (1753).
Lieutenant Colonel in the French and Indian War (1754).
Colonel and Commander, Virginia Forces (1755-1758).
Virginia House of Burgesses (1758-1774).
Justice of the Peace, Fairfax County (1768-1774).
First Continental Congress (1774).
Second Continental Congress (1775).
Commander of the Continental army (1775-1783).
President of the Constitutional Convention (1787).
First President of the United States (1789-1797).

Died

December 14, 1799, at his home in Mount Vernon, Virginia, where he was buried.

Last Words

"'Tis well."

from across the Delaware River to the trying times of Valley Forge and then the triumph of Yorktown in 1781. Through force of character and brilliant political leadership, Washington transformed an underfunded militia into a capable force that, although never able to take the British army head-on, outwitted

and defeated the mightiest military power in the world.

After the War of Independence was won, Washington played a key role in the formation of the new nation. He was instrumental in bringing about the Constitutional Convention. A conference at Mount Vernon was the stimulus for

Virginia to organize the Annapolis Conference, which in turn called for a convention in Philadelphia.

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Having been immediately and unanimously elected president of the convention, Washington worked actively throughout the proceedings, and an examination of his voting record shows his consistent support for a strong executive and defined national powers. His widely publicized participation gave the resulting document a credibility and legitimacy it would otherwise have lacked. The vast powers of the presidency, as one delegate to the Constitutional Convention wrote, would not have been made as great "had not many of the members cast their eyes towards General Washington as president; and shaped their ideas of the powers to be given to a president, by their opinions of his virtue."²

As our first President, Washington set the precedents that define what it means to be a constitutional executive. He was a strong, energetic President but always aware of the limits on his office; he deferred

1. James Monroe, letter to Thomas Jefferson, July 12, 1788, in *The Writings of James Monroe*, ed. Stanislaus Murray Hamilton (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1898), Vol. 1, p. 186.
2. Pierce Butler, letter to Weedon Butler, May 5, 1788, in *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, ed. Max Farrand (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1911), Vol. 3, pp. 301-302.

to authority when appropriate but aggressively defended his prerogatives when necessary. His first term as first President of the United States was dominated by creation of the new government and the debate over Alexander Hamilton's plan to build a national economy; his second was dominated by foreign affairs—mainly the French Revolution, which he wisely avoided, and the debate over his support of the Jay Treaty with Great Britain. Each of these events divided opinion and contributed to the rise of the first political parties.

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Washington wanted to retire after his first term, but the unanimous appeals of his colleagues induced him to serve again. Four years later—the situation stabilized, two important treaties concluded, and the republic strengthened—he finally decided to step down from the presidency, quit the political scene, and return to private life.

In 1796, on the anniversary of the Constitution, Washington released his Farewell Address, one of the greatest documents of the American political tradition. Best remembered for its counsel concerning international affairs, it also gives Washington's advice concerning federal union and the Constitution, faction and political parties, the

separation of powers, religion and morality, education and public credit.

During his lifetime, there was hardly a period when Washington was not in a position to bring his deep-seated ideas and the lessons of his experience to fruition, influencing not only events, but also, as his writings attest, the men around him. Four great themes of Washington's life—individual character, religion and religious liberty, the rule of law, and the defense of national independence—are particularly reflective of the objectives of his statesmanship and suggest why his example is a prime model for today's confused politics.

Character

That Washington is known for his character is no accident. One of his earliest writings was an adolescent copybook record of 110 "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation." Drawn from an early etiquette book, these social maxims taught lessons of good manners concerning everything from how to treat one's superiors ("In speaking to men of Quality do not lean nor look them full in the face"³) to how to moderate one's own behavior ("Let your recreations be manful not sinful"⁴). Simple rules of decent conduct, he always held, formed the backbone of good character.

In his later letters, Washington constantly warned young correspondents of "the necessity of paying due attention to the moral virtues" and

avoiding the "scenes of vice and dissipation"⁵ often presented to youth. Because an early and proper education in both manners and morals would form the leading traits of one's life, he constantly urged the development of good habits and the unremitting practice of moral virtue. As he advised one correspondent:

To point out the importance of circumspection in your conduct, it may be proper to observe that a good moral character is the first essential of man, and that the habits contracted at your age are generally indelible, and your conduct here may stamp your character through life. It is therefore highly important that you should endeavor not only to be *learned* but *virtuous*.⁶

Washington's own moral sense was the compass of both his private life and his public life, having become for him a "second" nature. The accumulation of the habits and dispositions, both good and bad, that one acquired over time defined one's character. In the 18th century, "character" was also shorthand for the persona for which one was known and was tied to one's public reputation. Washington knew that the best way to establish a good reputation was to be, in fact, a good man. "I hope I shall always possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain (what I consider the most enviable of all titles) the character of an honest man," he told Hamilton, "as well as

3. George Washington, *Rules of Civility* (New York: United States Book Company, 1890), p. 97.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

5. George Washington, letter to George Steptoe Washington, March 23, 1789, in *Writings of George Washington*, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1891), Vol. XI, p. 372.

6. George Washington, letter to George Steptoe Washington, December 5, 1790, in Ford., ed., *Writings of George Washington*, Vol. XI, p. 509. Emphasis added.

prove (what I desire to be considered in reality) that I am.”⁷

Republican government, far from being unconcerned about questions of virtue and character, was understood by Washington to require *self*-government. In his First Inaugural, Washington spoke of “the talents, the rectitude, and the patriotism, which adorn the characters selected to devise and adopt” the law. It was here, and not in the institutional arrangements or laws themselves, that Washington ultimately saw the “surest pledges” of wise policy and the guarantee that “the foundation of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality.”⁸

Religion and Religious Liberty

Religion and morality are the most important sources of character, Washington advises us, as they teach men their moral obligations and create the conditions for decent politics. They are necessary for the maintenance of public justice. A sense of individual religious obligation, Washington notes in his Farewell Address, is needed to support the oaths necessary in courts of law. But it goes beyond that:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain

would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens.⁹

WHILE IT IS OFTEN THOUGHT THAT THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE MARKS THE DIVORCE OF RELIGION AND POLITICS IN AMERICA, WASHINGTON'S CONCEPTION OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY WAS ALMOST EXACTLY THE OPPOSITE.

This holds true despite the theories of academic elites, then or now, who argue that religion is not required to support the morality needed for free government. “And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion.” Washington conceded some ground to rationalists—like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson—who seem to have had less personal use for religion. Nevertheless, he insisted on the general argument. “No matter what might be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”¹⁰ While there might be particular cases where morality did not depend

on religion, this was not the case for the morality of the nation.

Washington’s statements about the importance of religion in politics must be understood in light of his equally strong defense of religious liberty. In a letter to the United Baptists, for instance, he writes that he will be a zealous guardian against “spiritual tyranny, and every species of religious persecution,” and that under the federal Constitution every American would be protected in “worshiping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience.”¹¹ Perhaps Washington’s most eloquent statement is found in his letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.¹²

While it is often thought that the separation of church and state marks the divorce of religion and politics in America, Washington’s conception of

7. George Washington, letter to Alexander Hamilton, August 28, 1788, in Ford., ed., *Writings of George Washington*, Vol. XI, p. 317.

8. George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796, Heritage Foundation *Primary Sources*, <http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/washingtons-farewell-address>.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. George Washington, letter to The United Baptist Churches in Virginia, May 1789, in *Writings of George Washington*, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston: The American Stationer’s Company, 1837), Vol. XII, p. 155.

12. George Washington, letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, August 18, 1790, Heritage Foundation *Primary Sources*, <http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/washington-s-letter-to-the-hebrew-congregation-of-newport-rhode-island>.

religious liberty was almost exactly the opposite. His understanding of free government requires the moralization of politics, which includes—and requires—the expansion of religious influence in our politics. For Washington, religious liberty meant that religion, in the form of morality and the moral teachings of religion, was now free to exercise an unprecedented influence over private and public opinion by shaping mores, cultivating virtues, and in general providing an independent source of moral reasoning and authority.

The Rule of Law

Washington led a revolution to root out monarchical rule in America and establish a republican government based on the rule of law. In 1776 and again in 1777, when Congress was forced to abandon Philadelphia in the face of advancing British troops, General Washington was granted dictatorial powers to maintain the war effort and preserve civil society; he gave the authority back as soon as possible.

At the end of the war, at the moment of military triumph, one of his colonels raised the possibility of making Washington an American king—a proposal he immediately repudiated. Likewise, Washington rejected the option of using military force (with or without his participation) to take control of Congress and force upon it a new national administration. Instead, when the task assigned him was complete, General Washington resigned his military

commission and returned to private life.

We take for granted the peaceful transfer of power from one President to another, but it was Washington's relinquishing of power in favor of the rule of law—a first in the annals of modern history—that made those transitions possible. “The moderation and virtue of a single character,” Thomas Jefferson tellingly noted, “probably prevented this Revolution from being closed, as most others have been, by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish.”¹³ His peaceful transfer of the presidency to John Adams in 1797 inaugurated one of America's greatest democratic traditions. King George III said that Washington's retirement, combined with his resignation 14 years earlier, “placed him in a light the most distinguished of any living man” and made him “the greatest character of the age.”¹⁴

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George Washington was a strong supporter of the Constitution. It established a limited but strong national government, created an energetic executive, and formed the

legal framework necessary for a commercial republic. By the Constitution, our government is limited and structured to prevent encroachment, with “as much vigour as is consistent with the perfect security of Liberty” yet strong enough “to maintain all in the secure and tranquil enjoyment of the rights of person and property.” As a result, it is our strongest check against tyranny and the best guardian of our freedoms. Washington reminds us that it deserves our support and fidelity. Until formally changed “by an explicit and authentic act of the whole People,” he wrote, the Constitution is “sacredly obligatory upon all.”¹⁵

Ignoring the Constitution and allowing the rule of law to be weakened, Washington sternly warns us, is done at our own peril. Americans must always guard against “irregular oppositions” to legitimate authority and “the spirit of innovation” that desires to circumvent the principles of our Constitution. Nor should we overlook Washington's abiding concern about the corrupting power of the state. He warns us that government tends to encroach on freedom and consolidate power: “A just estimate of that love of power, and proneness to abuse it, which predominates in the human heart is sufficient to satisfy us of the truth of this position.” In the long run, disregard for the rule of law allows “cunning, ambitious and unprincipled men” to subvert the people and take power illegitimately by force or fraud. This, he reminds us, is “the customary

13. Thomas Jefferson, letter to George Washington, April 16, 1784, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H. A. Washington (Washington: Taylor & Maury, 1853), Vol. I, p. 335.

14. Quoted in Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), p. 103.

15. Washington, Farewell Address.

16. *Ibid.*

weapon by which free governments are destroyed.”¹⁶

National Independence

In the most quoted—and misinterpreted—passage of his Farewell Address, Washington warns against excessive ties with any country:

“Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent Alliances, with any portion of the foreign world.” He recommends as the great rule of conduct that the United States primarily pursue commercial relations with other nations and have with them “as little political connection as possible.”¹⁷

Although this statement is often cited to support isolationism, it is difficult to construe Washington’s words as a prescription for strict noninvolvement in the political and military affairs of the world. The activities of his Administration suggest no such policy.

The warning against “entangling alliances,”¹⁸ often attributed to Washington, is to be found in the 1801 Inaugural Address of Thomas Jefferson. President Washington warned against political connections and permanent alliances with other nations, and he added the hedge, “So far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do.” In order to maintain a strong defensive posture, the nation could depend on “temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.”¹⁹

The predominant motive of all of Washington’s policies, both foreign and domestic, was to see America “settle and mature its yet recent

institutions” so as to build the political, economic, and physical strength—and the international standing—necessary to give the nation “the command of its own fortunes.”²⁰ Rather than a passive condition of detachment, Washington describes an active policy of national independence as necessary for America, at some not too distant period in the future, to determine its own fate.

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Commerce, not conquest or subservience, was to be America’s primary means for acquiring goods and dealing with the world. Commercial policy should be impartial, neither seeking nor granting favors or preferences, and flexible, changing from time to time as experience and circumstances dictate. But even under the best circumstances, economic and trade policy should be conducted in ways that maintain American independence.

To be sure, Washington’s intent

was to establish a strong, self-determined, and independent foreign policy, but this idea also encompasses a sense of moral purpose and well being—sovereignty in the fullest and most complete sense. For America, this means a free people governing themselves, establishing their own laws, and setting up a government they think will best ensure their safety and happiness—or, as the Declaration of Independence says, “to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God entitle them” and obtain the full power to do the “Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.”²¹

In the end, to have the command of its own fortunes means that America has the full use of its independence—not to impose its will on other nations but to prove, without help or hindrance from other nations, the viability of republican government. Washington’s wish, as explained to Patrick Henry, was that the United States “*may be independent of all, and under the influence of none*. In a word, I want an American character, that the powers of Europe may be convinced we act for *ourselves* and not for *others*; this in my judgment, is the only way to be respected abroad and happy at home.”²²

First in War, First in Peace

The last journeys of Washington’s life were to the army camp at

17. Ibid.

18. Thomas Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801, Heritage Foundation *Primary Sources*, <http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/jeffersons-first-inaugural-address>.

19. Washington, Farewell Address.

20. Ibid.

21. Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, Heritage Foundation *Primary Sources*, <http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/the-declaration-of-independence>.

22. George Washington, letter to Patrick Henry, October 9, 1795, in Ford., ed., *Writings of George Washington*, Vol. XIII, p. 120. Emphasis in original.

Harper's Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), and to Philadelphia to consult on military matters. That same year, President Adams appointed Washington head of a provisional army during a period of tensions with France. But Washington was happily retired at his beloved home, Mount Vernon. A sore throat, the result of inspecting his farm during a snowstorm, quickly worsened, and he died on December 14, 1799.

The news of Washington's death spread quickly throughout the young nation. Every major city and most towns conducted official observances. Churches held services to commemorate his life and role in the American Revolution. Innumerable pronouncements, speeches, and sermons were delivered to lament the event. From the date of his death until his birthday in 1800, some 300 eulogies were published throughout

the United States, from as far north as Maine and as far south as Georgia to as far west as Natchez on the Mississippi River.

Congressman Richard Henry Lee delivered the official eulogy, which was written by John Marshall. Although we remember only a few phrases today, it included these memorable words:

First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in humble and enduring scenes of private life. Pious, just, humane, temperate, and sincere; uniform, dignified, and commanding, his example was as edifying to all around him as were the effects of that example lasting.... Correct throughout, vice shuddered in his presence and virtue always felt his fostering hand.

The purity of his private character gave effulgence to his public virtues.²³

"Let his countrymen consecrate the memory of the heroic general, the patriotic statesman and the virtuous sage," read the official message of the United States Senate. "Let them teach their children never to forget that the fruit of his labors and his example are their inheritance."²⁴

President John Adams was more to the point: "His example is now complete, and it will teach wisdom and virtue to magistrates, citizens, and men, not only in the present age, but in future generations, as long as our history shall be read."²⁵

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23. Richard Henry Lee, Eulogy of George Washington, in *Eulogies and Orations on the Life and Death of General George Washington, First President of the United States of America* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1800), p. 17.

24. Frederick L. Harvey, *Congressional Serial Set: History of the Washington National Monument and Washington National Monument Society* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1903), p. 183.

25. John Adams, Message to the Senate, in *The Addresses and Messages of the Presidents of the United States, From 1789 to 1839* (New York: McLean & Taylor, 1839), p. 85.
