

## Establishing a Government of Laws, Not Men: George Washington's Retirement and Responsibility

- **Compelling Question**
  - Why is important for you to act responsibly as a United States citizen?
- **Virtue:** Responsibility
- **Definition** – Responsibility is accountability to myself and others.
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will review George Washington's actions in completing his service as Commander in Chief following the Revolutionary War, including his return of his military commission to the president of Congress. They will achieve the following objectives.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze George Washington's character as a leader, and his actions in voluntarily surrendering power when he had the opportunity to hold onto it indefinitely.
  - Students will examine Washington's understanding of responsibility as an American citizen.
  - Students will understand why acting responsibly affects the future of the United States.
  - Students will act responsibly in their own lives to protect freedom.
- **Background**
  - The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote, "It is more proper that law should govern than any one of the citizens: upon the same principle, if it is advantageous to place the supreme power in some particular persons, they should be appointed to be only guardians, and the servants of the laws." He explained that rule by absolute power is unnatural and harmful because those who hold such power are likely to abuse it by depriving others of their rights. "Moreover, he who would place the supreme power in mind, would place it in God and the laws; but he who entrusts man with it, gives it to a wild beast, for such his appetites sometimes make him; for passion influences those who are in power, even the very best of men: for which reason law is reason without desire." This principle is known as rule of law, and America's Founders knew it was essential in a republic. John Adams, describing his objective in crafting the Massachusetts constitution, phrased it this way: "to the end it may be a government of laws and not of men."

Also well-known to the Founders was the story of an ancient Roman hero named Cincinnatus. According to the Roman historian Livy, Cincinnatus was a hero who rescued Rome about 200 years before Aristotle's time. Rome's government was a republic, but the law allowed the Senate to choose a dictator who would have absolute power for up to six months in times of extreme crisis. Cincinnatus was a well-respected former senator, retired from public life and happy running his farm just outside the city. The Senate called on him to become temporary dictator due to danger from an enemy army. Cincinnatus agreed to serve his country in this way and within sixteen days he had created an ingenious plan to defeat the enemy and led the Roman troops to victory. Then he promptly relinquished power and returned to his farm. Cincinnatus was a true model of selfless service, humility, and responsibility, and it was not uncommon during George Washington's life for his contemporaries to call him, "our Cincinnatus".
- **Vocabulary**
  - Conspiracy
  - Indissoluble
  - Attributed
  - Military commission
  - Diffidence
  - Superseded
  - Aggrandizement
  - August
  - Precedent

- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
  - In what ways did George Washington exercise responsibility to enhance life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for himself and others? What other virtues did Washington demonstrate?
  - What is George Washington’s identity during this time? How do you know that Washington understood the significance of his personal involvement in the establishment of the early republic?
  - George Washington was pleased when contemporaries compared him to Cincinnatus. In what ways did Washington’s story parallel that of Cincinnatus?
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
  - George Washington’s Mount Vernon: <http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/>
  - George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html>
  - The Founders Online—The Papers of George Washington: <http://founders.archives.gov/about/Washington>
  - George Washington Resigning His Commission –John Trumbull painting: <http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/historic-rotunda-paintings/general-george-washington-resigning-his-commission>

## Handout A: Establishing a Government of Laws, Not Men: George Washington's Retirement and Responsibility

### Background

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote, "It is more proper that law should govern than any one of the citizens: upon the same principle, if it is advantageous to place the supreme power in some particular persons, they should be appointed to be only guardians, and the servants of the laws." He explained that rule by absolute power is unnatural and harmful because those who hold such power are likely to abuse it by depriving others of their rights. "Moreover, he who would place the supreme power in mind, would place it in God and the laws; but he who entrusts man with it, gives it to a wild beast, for such his appetites sometimes make him; for passion influences those who are in power, even the very best of men: for which reason law is reason without desire." This principle is known as rule of law, and America's Founders knew it was essential in a republic. John Adams, describing his objective in crafting the Massachusetts constitution, phrased it this way: "to the end it may be a government of laws and not of men."

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### Narrative

The Americans won the Revolutionary War in October, 1781, with the victory at the Battle of Yorktown. Although the fighting had stopped, the British continued to occupy New York and Charleston until a peace treaty was signed. In Paris, in late November, 1782, peace commissioners Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay negotiated a preliminary peace treaty with the British. In September, 1783, the commissioners signed the final peace treaty, and the British Army in America evacuated in November, when word arrived. America was now an independent country but had to be founded on the right principles. In early 1783, after eight years away from his family while commanding the army, Washington yearned for retirement to Mount Vernon. He often paraphrased the Book of Micah in his letters to describe his feelings: "It being my anxious desire to quit the walks of public life, and under the shadow of my own vine, and my own fig-tree, to seek those enjoyments, and that relaxation, which a mind that has been constantly upon the stretch for more than eight years, stands so much in need of." But, as was his life-long practice, he chose to fulfill his duty to public service before he returned home.

In early 1783, Washington had suppressed a rebellion, called the Newburgh Conspiracy, among certain army officers. Although he had uncompromisingly and dramatically ended the conspiracy, he was sympathetic to the pleas of his army, most of whom had not been paid for their service. He had grappled with Congress to supply his army for years and now begged Congress to fulfill its obligations, but to no avail. Washington was not surprised that spring when many of the soldiers and officers began to leave the army and simply went home.

Still, Washington sought to encourage his fellow Americans to build the new nation on the right principles, which included a commitment to republican government, unity, virtuous character, and service. In June, he issued a letter to the states and the American people which called on them to establish "an indissoluble Union of the states" and to cultivate a "brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow citizens of the United States." Washington saw it as his duty to build a lasting republic since he and his men had sacrificed so much over the past eight years to win independence and create a republican government. Over the next few months, it seemed that he realized that his actions and character would speak louder than words.

The final peace treaty with Great Britain arrived, and Washington made plans for what remained of his army to re-occupy New York. On November 2, Washington thanked the Revolutionary War soldiers for their service in the

army. They had fought with numerous disadvantages and deprivations, but had endured and won a victory against the British despite overwhelming odds. Washington attributed the American victory to their character: “The . . . unparalleled perseverance of the armies of the United States, through almost every possible suffering and discouragement for the space of eight long years, was little short of a standing miracle.” He again advanced the idea of national unity and character, impressed that “men who came from the different parts of the continent . . . would instantly become but one patriotic band of brothers.”

Later that month, Washington marched the remnants of the army into New York to cheering crowds. He said a tearful farewell to his officers at Fraunces Tavern and then departed for Annapolis, Maryland, where Congress was then assembled. He was honored by citizens and public officials at dinners and balls as he traveled. Finally, on December 23, Washington appeared before Congress to perform one of the most important actions in all of American history – surrendering his military commission.

With his voice trembling, Washington humbly told the Congress, “Happy in the confirmation of our independence and sovereignty, and pleased with the opportunity afforded the United States of becoming a respectable nation, I resign with satisfaction the appointment I accepted with diffidence.” Having successfully completed his mission to win the Revolutionary War and secure American independence from Great Britain, Washington was surrendering his commission. It was an act that was unprecedented, and established that in the United States, the civilian republican government superseded the military. Washington would follow the example of the legendary Roman Cincinnatus who was given temporary power and then returned to his plow, rather than countless historical figures like Caesar who sought their own glory and aggrandizement while seizing power. Washington stated, “Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theater of action; and bidding an affectionate farewell to this august body under whose orders I have so long acted, I here offer my commission and take my leave of all the employments of public life.”

With that, Washington reached into his pocket and withdrew the yellowed parchment containing his 1775 commission. He stepped forward and handed it solemnly to the president of Congress. Everyone in the hall wiped tears from their eyes. He left the hall and traveled to Mount Vernon on Christmas Eve to celebrate the holiday with his wife, Martha Washington. British King George III reportedly said that if Washington voluntarily surrendered power, he “will be the greatest man in the world.”

Over the next two decades, Washington would only reluctantly come out of retirement to serve the republic. He demonstrated his commitment to duty by pushing aside his plans for a comfortable retirement – first, at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, and second, to assume the presidency for two terms. Again, though he could have been president for life, Washington retired from the presidency in order to establish a precedent of rotation in office. Washington was continually called into service by his country and accepted the grave responsibilities with which he was entrusted, and he consistently saw it as his responsibility to exercise that power wisely and then surrender it. In doing so, General and President George Washington established that the American republic is a nation of laws, not men.

### Questions to Consider

1. Put the following passage in your own words: “Happy in the confirmation of our independence and sovereignty, and pleased with the opportunity afforded the United States of becoming a respectable nation, I resign with satisfaction the appointment I accepted with diffidence.” How did his statement reveal the connection between Washington’s purpose (protecting liberty for his contemporaries and for future generations) and his performance of that purpose?
2. George Washington understood what it meant to be a responsible leader to protect freedom. How does acting responsibly protect freedom?

### Journal Prompt

What did George Washington see as his purpose at the end of the American Revolution?

## Handout B: Journaling

Answer the following questions in your journal, as you prepare to voluntarily share some of your responses in a class discussion.

1. In what situations in your own life have you had opportunity to take responsibility for leadership in a worthy goal? To what extent have you done so?
2. To what extent are you currently using your unique talents and skills to achieve your purpose? What virtues are you demonstrating? What virtues are you cultivating and improving? Whose responsibility is it to keep your life's trajectory on track?
3. To what extent and in what ways do your unique characteristics enable your pursuit of a life that is on track to achieve your purpose?
4. To what extent and in what ways does your performance align with your identity and purpose? What are you doing this very day to cultivate skills and interests that will connect today's purposes with your long-term opportunity to enhance and protect the life and liberty of others?
5. How can being a responsible citizen lead to freedom for yourself and others?
6. How can you act responsibly as a citizen? How do responsible actions help you to achieve your purpose?
7. How does Washington's retirement help you see your purpose as an American citizen?
8. How can you help others be responsible American citizens?