



Washington, George

George Washington (1732–1799), a Virginian, became an officer in his state’s militia and later fought courageously in the French and Indian War. When the American Revolution began, he was given command of the Continental army. In 1788, under the new Constitution, he was elected, unopposed, the nation’s first president. His ability, honor, and integrity won him the admiration and love of his contemporaries. Washington is the standard against which all American leaders are measured.

George Washington, the eldest son in a prominent Virginia family, was born in Westmoreland County on February 22, 1732; he was athletic as a youth, and he excelled at horseback riding and other outdoor activities. He became a planter and surveyor. Assigned to survey Lord Fairfax’s lands in the Shenandoah Valley in 1748, Washington did such a good job that he was later appointed the surveyor for Culpeper County. His duties took him all over Virginia and provided the future general with knowledge of the terrain and features of the colony. When his older half brother, Lawrence, died in 1752, Washington inherited Mount Vernon, the estate that became his lifelong home. Washington was also appointed a major in the militia and took over Lawrence’s post as adjutant of the colony.

Early Military Career

In 1753 Governor Robert Dinwiddie sent Washington to warn the French against expanding into areas of the Ohio valley that were claimed by the British. Washington traveled to Fort Le Boeuf (near Lake Erie in northwestern Pennsylvania) and negotiated with the French. His efforts did not prevent conflict, but the difficulties that Washington overcame on this journey earned him the respect of his superiors. He was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel in 1754, at the age of twenty-two, when the French and Indian War began in earnest. The British and French sides each used colonial militias and Indian allies; Washington’s performance in the war earned him the colonists’ admiration.

Washington led a militia unit that established Fort Necessity at Great Meadows. His troops scored a victory against French forces under the command of Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville. The French subsequently defeated Washington at Fort Necessity on July 3, 1754, and he was forced to surrender. After returning to Williamsburg, he resigned his commission rather than accept a demotion in rank. In 1755 he returned to serve in General Edward Braddock’s campaign in the Ohio valley. The French ambushed Braddock’s forces at the Monongahela River on July 9, 1755. Washington, though ill, rallied his fellow Virginians and led a withdrawal that permitted the bulk of the British and colonial forces to retreat. Washington nearly became a casualty: two horses were shot out from beneath him, and several bullets tore through his coat. His efforts earned him promotion to colonel, and he later assumed command

of the Virginia militia. The reputation for bravery and leadership that Washington developed during the French and Indian War made his name known throughout the colonies.

The War for American Independence

After the French and Indian War, Washington returned to Mount Vernon. He married Martha Dandridge Custis on January 6, 1759. Washington was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses and served in the chamber from 1759 to 1774, a time of growing tension between England and the American colonies. The British had acted dismissively toward the colonials, including Washington, during the French and Indian War. Washington resented this treatment and assumed a leading role in opposing Britain's tax policies. Like other colonists, Washington also resented British commercial regulations and believed that the Stamp Act and similar measures exploited American merchants. Washington served as a delegate to the Continental Congresses in 1774 and 1775. In June 1775 the Second Continental Congress unanimously appointed him the commander of the Continental army.

On July 3, 1775, Washington took command of 14,000 men near Boston. During the next months the general focused on organizing, training, and supplying these troops. In March 1776 Washington's forces seized Dorchester Heights above the city. This move made the position of the British in Boston untenable, and they withdrew on March 17. The Continental army was far from final victory, but Washington's success in Boston gave the Continental Congress confidence as it debated full independence from the British Empire.

Defeats and Strategic Retreats

After Boston, Washington concentrated his army against the British forces in New York. The British inflicted a defeat on Washington's forces in Brooklyn. He conducted a skillful retreat, however, and had regrouped in eastern Pennsylvania by the end of 1776. The retreat into Pennsylvania forced the Continental Congress to evacuate Philadelphia but saved the core of the American army from further defeat or capture.

By now, some prominent Americans were questioning Washington's management of the war. In addition, many Continental soldiers had deserted, and others were close to the end of their enlistment. Supplies were short, and the army's morale was low. Washington's efforts to gain more funding and supplies from an increasingly skeptical and pessimistic congress met with small success. Yet Washington was still able to begin 1777 with two victories. Late on Christmas night 1776, the Continental army crossed the Delaware and defeated a force of Hessian mercenaries in Trenton. The army then marched on Princeton, where it defeated a British force on January 3. Washington's offensive was brilliant: the British had not expected the Americans to campaign in the harsh winter.

Washington's victory streak did not last. Later in the year he was defeated at Germantown and Brandywine. Meanwhile, in October 1777, Benedict Arnold defeated the British at Saratoga in a victory that brought the French into the war on the side of the Americans. For a time it seemed that Washington might be replaced as commander. However, his supporters in congress ensured that he retained his command. Washington became more adept at dealing with the Continental

Congress, though he continued to be frustrated by its inability to provide his troops with adequate supplies and armaments.

WILHELM VON STEUBEN, 1730–1794

Wilhelm von Steuben was born on September 17, 1730, at Magdeburg fortress, in Prussia. Steuben entered the Prussian military at the age of seventeen, and his involvement in the army lasted until 1763. In recognition of his military exploits, Steuben was made a baron. He became a mercenary and fought for foreign armies throughout Europe. The ideals of the American Revolution attracted the Prussian, who offered to aid the Continental army without pay. George Washington and the Continental Congress accepted his offer. In February 1778 Steuben arrived at Valley Forge to train Washington's troops, despite the fact that he spoke only German and French. Washington's aide-de-camp, Alexander Hamilton, and General Nathanael Greene helped Steuben communicate with the troops. Steuben's training included both combat drills and rules for camp sanitation. With Steuben's methods resulting in noticeable improvements in the Continental army, Washington recommended that he be promoted to inspector general; Congress approved the promotion on May 5, 1778. Steuben's training of southern Continental forces was also critical, as was his service as a division commander at the Battle of Yorktown. After the war he settled in New York State, where he died on November 28, 1794.

As winter came, Washington stationed his army at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Conditions at Valley Forge were harsh, but Washington managed to hold his army together. Two foreign officers assisted Washington in training his army during the winter of 1777/1778. Baron von Steuben of Prussia and the Marquis de Lafayette of France laboriously instilled in the Americans the discipline and morale necessary to defeat the British.

Victory

The South became the focus of the war when the British commanding general, Charles Cornwallis, launched an offensive in the region. In May 1781 Washington met with Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur (Comte de Rochambeau), the commander of the French forces sent to aid the Americans. The two decided to concentrate their forces against New York, but word soon arrived that Lord Cornwallis and the British were encamped at Yorktown, Virginia. Washington realized that the British could be cut off from their supply routes. As Cornwallis rapidly moved south with his forces, a French naval squadron blocked the mouth of Chesapeake Bay and effectively trapped him. The combined French and American land forces laid siege to the British position, and on October 19, 1781, Cornwallis surrendered. The defeat of Cornwallis ended the War for Independence, although the formal peace settlement was not signed for another two years.

The Newburgh Conspiracy

With the end of combat, Washington faced another challenge, this one from his own troops. In

what became known as the Newburgh Conspiracy (or Mutiny), some of Washington's officers sought to overthrow the Continental Congress. The causes of the Newburgh Conspiracy were financial. By the summer of 1782, the congress could neither pay interest to creditors nor meet the army payroll. Some soldiers were owed as much as six years' worth of back pay, and none had been paid in months. Many officers had defaulted on personal debt during the war and needed their back pay to avoid imprisonment. Congress refused to act to satisfy the discontented officers, most of whom realized that Washington would never support a mutiny. Consequently they approached Major General Henry Knox, then the commandant of West Point, to join them. Knox refused because, as he said, "I consider the reputation of the American army as one of the most immaculate things on earth." Major General Horatio Gates, who was second in command at Newburgh, was more sympathetic.

Washington had great sympathy for the plight of his officers, but he stopped the Newburgh Conspiracy before any armed action was taken. He addressed his officers on the evening of March 15, 1783, and announced that he was going to read a letter from a member of congress. After producing the letter, Washington pulled a pair of glasses out of his jacket. Only a few of his highest-ranking officers had seen him with spectacles. Washington announced, "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray, but almost blind, in the service of my country." The contents of the letter made no difference; Washington had already put an end to the mutiny. His suppression of the Newburgh Conspiracy was one of his most important acts. Washington could have led his officers and seized power for himself, yet he refused to betray congress, and the precedent whereby the U.S. military would submit to civilian authority, whatever the circumstances, was set in place.

Postwar Politics and the First Presidency

After the war Washington focused on restoring Mount Vernon, which had fallen into disrepair. He also expanded his estate. In May 1787 he returned to public life as the head of the Virginia delegation to the Constitutional Convention, where he was a leader of the Federalist faction, which was pushing to establish a stronger central government. Washington's support for the Constitution was important in overcoming the objections of those who feared that the new government would lead to tyranny. The great power that the Constitution gave to the chief executive was entrusted to Washington. He was overwhelmingly elected to the newly created presidency in 1788 and won the unanimous vote of the electoral college.

In his first inaugural address George Washington spoke not only of his own responsibilities but of the example that all Americans must set before the world as citizens in a free society.

The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the republican model of government, are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.

FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS
(APRIL 30, 1789)

Under Washington many of the departments and practices of the federal government were

established. The former general proved an excellent administrator. He appointed able subordinates and welcomed debate and discussion on major issues. Believing the president should be above party politics, he refused to join one of the factions that came to dominate early American politics. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton and his supporters favored strong, centralized government and restriction of foreign trade. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and his supporters favored limited government, agriculture, and relatively free trade. Washington at first attempted to moderate the differences between these factions, but he ultimately sided with Hamilton. Hamilton's program included assumption of state debts by the central government, enactment of protective tariffs, a seven-cent-per-gallon excise tax on liquor, and the founding of the First Bank of the United States. Enactment of Hamilton's program was a victory for the Federalist Party and its allied northern interests. Jefferson agreed to accept the program, provided that the national capital—what became Washington, DC—was located in the South.

Hamilton's tax on liquor produced the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. People in frontier areas viewed the tax as unfair. In the tradition of the Revolution, those opposed to the tax took up arms. At one point the leaders of the rebellion, which was centered in Pennsylvania, mustered 7,000 troops. Washington sent 13,000 men commanded by Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, who was accompanied by Hamilton, into western Pennsylvania to suppress the rebellion. The rebels never met Lee's troops in battle; the display of federal military power prompted most to return to their farms and homes. The main result of the affair was that the federal government's authority was strengthened.

As he left public life, Washington urged his countrymen, especially those who served in government or pursued commercial interests, to learn from the errors of the past. His advice to keep alliances and partnerships to an absolute minimum—honored nowadays more in the breach than the observance—long determined the conduct of U.S commercial and foreign policy.

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.... Harmony, liberal intercourse with all nations are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest. But even our commercial policy should hold an equal and impartial hand, neither seeking nor granting exclusive favors or preferences; consulting the natural course of things; diffusing and diversifying by gentle means the streams of commerce, but forcing nothing; establishing with powers so disposed, in order to give trade a stable course, to define the rights of our merchants, and to enable the Government to support them.

FAREWELL ADDRESS
(SEPTEMBER 19, 1796)

Washington was elected to a second term in 1792. The Hamilton-Jefferson divide deepened during the war between the French and British that followed the French Revolution (1789). The Jeffersonians supported France; the revolution's excesses shocked Washington, who, being interested in developing commercial ties with the English, adopted neutrality as his policy. In 1794 Washington signed Jay's Treaty, which resolved border issues between the United States and Canada, settled issues related to debts left over from the American Revolution, and opened British Caribbean colonies to trade with America. In 1796 Washington's supporters wanted him to seek a third term; in declining, he said that presidents should not serve more than two terms.

The Final Years

Washington left office in March 1797. In his Farewell Address he warned against the divisive nature of party politics; he urged all Americans to put aside party and unite for the common good. Washington is often thought to have also warned against "entangling alliances," but that particular phrase came from Jefferson. Washington did warn against involvement in foreign wars, against overgrown military establishments as threats to liberty, and against "habitual hatred or habitual fondness" of any other nation. Foreign policy should consist of "extending our commercial relations with as little political connection as possible." America should avoid permanent alliances and enter into "temporary alliances only for extraordinary emergencies."

Washington's Farewell Address had great impact upon nineteenth-century foreign policy. Washington also set the precedent for voluntary presidential term limits. For 144 years presidents simply followed Washington's example. After Franklin D. Roosevelt broke the two-term tradition, the Twenty-second Amendment restricted future presidents to two full terms (or a maximum of ten years).

In 1798, as war with France began to seem imminent, Washington was prevailed upon to come out of retirement and accept command of the army. He returned to private life after the threat of war with France ended. Washington fell ill at Mount Vernon and died on December 14, 1799. His old colleague Light-Horse Harry Lee eulogized him in words that were formally adopted by the U.S. Congress: "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

The Father of His Country

No other president did more to shape U.S. history than George Washington. His leadership of the Continental army secured American independence, and his presidency established the viability of federalism. Some few of his actions as president may have been heavy-handed—especially his suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion—but Washington's place in history is immense, and his influence is still felt. He clearly deserves to be remembered as the father of his country.

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