

# 10 The Greatness of George Washington

**GORDON S. WOOD**

---

*In recent polls, American historians and presidential scholars ranked George Washington as the third best president in American history (Abraham Lincoln was first and Franklin D. Roosevelt second). In the following selection, Gordon S. Wood challenges those polls and argues that Washington deserves first-place honors. More than any other statesman, specialists contend, Washington defined the presidency and set the standard for executive leadership. "It is no exaggeration to say that but for George Washington, the office of president might not exist," one historian maintains. Washington was so respected in his day, so much above factional bickering and regional jealousies, that he was probably the only leader behind whom the country could unite. "One of the problems with Washington," says writer Garry Wills, "is that we think of him in the wrong company, as a peer of Franklin and Jefferson, when he belongs in the select company of Caesar, Napoleon and Cromwell as a charismatic nation-builder who personified an epoch."*

*Not that Washington was a saint. Like all of us, the first president had human flaws—among them, an aloofness that made him a hard man to know. Uncomfortable among learned men, he developed the habit of listening carefully to what was being said, pondering it, but rarely expressing his own opinion. His reticence struck some as arrogance, what an Englishman described as "repulsive coldness." His formidable size contributed to his seeming aloofness: standing a "ramrod straight" six-feet, three inches, which made him a giant in his day, he looked down at everybody. A man of robust health and energy, he nevertheless suffered from chronic dental problems and had to wear false teeth made of ivory and wood.*

*Adapting himself to the slave-owning world in which he was born and raised, Washington became a wealthy Virginia planter who owned as many as 317 slaves and shared the racial prejudice of most whites of his time. He even brought slave "servants" to the president's house in Philadelphia. He said he regretted that slavery existed and wished it could be abolished but was unable to do anything about it beyond providing for the manumission of his own slaves upon his death.*

*Wood makes clear that "Washington's genius, his greatness, lay in his character." He cultivated the role of "classical hero" that required him to remain aloof. For example, he did not like to be touched and even felt that hand-shaking was too personal. When you came into his office, you stood in his presence unless he asked you to sit. One old friend, Gouverneur Morris, bet Alexander Hamilton that he could slap Washington on the shoulder and compliment him on his appearance. Hamilton, who knew the general all too well, retorted that he would treat Morris and his friends to dinner and wine if*

*Washington allowed such familiarity. All eyes were on Morris when he dared to approach Washington at a reception. True to his word, Morris placed a hand on Washington's shoulder as he warmly greeted him. True to his character, Washington removed the hand and coldly stared as Morris escaped through the embarrassed bystanders.*

*In *The First of Men* (1988), the best biography of Washington yet written, historian John E. Ferling reveals that Washington had a complex and contradictory character. He suffered from low self-esteem, struggled all his life to overcome feelings of worthlessness, and had a pathological need for the admiration and affirmation of other people. Yet, as Ferling reminds us, Washington was also a man of extraordinary personal courage. He demonstrated a rare ability for self-criticism, strove hard to better himself, proved to be an excellent organizer, and gave his family "tender love and abiding steadfastness." But his most significant achievement, Wood believes, was his voluntary abandonment of power, which established an important precedent for the infant nation. "Washington gained his power by his readiness to give it up." Retreating to his beloved Mt. Vernon only to have his countrymen plead that he return to public service, Washington was truly the indispensable man of the early national period.*

## GLOSSARY

**CINCINNATUS** The legendary figure of the Roman Empire who, after successful military campaigns, returned to his farm and private life. Washington's willingness to surrender his sword to the Continental Congress and return to Mt. Vernon seemed to many Americans to represent a similar renunciation of power.

**ENLIGHTENMENT** This seventeenth- and eighteenth-century movement focused on the use of reason, the advancement of science, and the dignity of mankind. Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, Franklin's experiments with electricity, and Washington's moral code all owed much to this advanced body of thinking.

**FEDERALISTS** One of the first political parties, formed around the personality and programs of Alexander Hamilton. It found Jefferson and his followers a threat to America's national security because of their pro-French attitudes. Washington, although he protested that he was above politics, was gradually drawn into the Federalist camp.

**L'ENFANT, PIERRE** A French engineer, intelligent but temperamental, who conceived of the design of the nation's capital. Washington, unlike Jefferson, wanted a city that in its grand scale would match the respect and power that he hoped the infant nation would eventually achieve.

**STUART, GILBERT** A respected American painter whose portrait of Washington did not measure up to his portraits of Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe. Washington's stiffness and formality worked against the artist's attempts to portray any sense of personality or feelings.

**TRUMBULL, JOHN** One of the outstanding American painters of the early national period. Four of his famous paintings of the climactic moments during the American Revolution hang in the United States Capitol today.

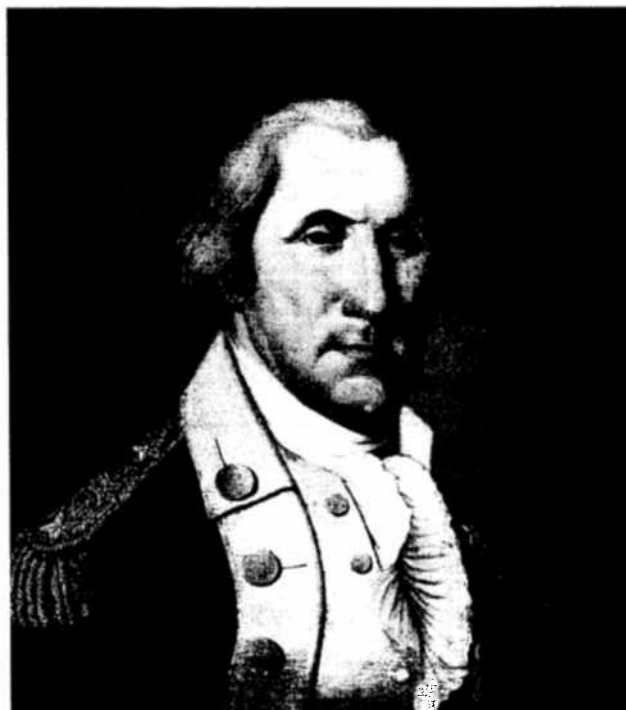
**WEEMS, PARSON** The first biographer of Washington who was more concerned with perpetuating the image of his subject than achieving historical accuracy. Weems created the myth of the downed cherry tree and the brave boy who shouldered the blame.

George Washington may still be first in war and first in peace, but he no longer seems to be first in the hearts of his countrymen. Or at least in the hearts of American historians. A recent poll of 900 American historians shows that Washington has dropped to third place in presidential greatness behind Lincoln and FDR. Which only goes to show how little American historians know about American history.

Polls of historians about presidential greatness are probably silly things, but, if they are to be taken seriously, then Washington fully deserved the first place he has traditionally held. He certainly deserved the accolades his contemporaries gave him. And as long as this republic endures he ought to be first in the hearts of his countrymen. Washington was truly a great man and the greatest president we have ever had.

But he was a great man who is not easy to understand. He became very quickly, as has often been pointed out, more a monument than a man, statuesque and impenetrable. Even his contemporaries realized that he was not an ordinary accessible human being. He was deified in his own lifetime. "O Washington," declared Ezra Stiles, president of Yale, in 1783. "How I do love thy name! How have I adored and blessed thy God, for creating and forming thee, the great ornament of human kind! . . . Thy fame is of sweeter perfume than Arabian spices. Listening angels shall catch the odor, waft it to heaven and perfume the universe!"

One scholar has said that Washington has been "the object of the most intense display of hero worship this nation has ever seen." Which helps explain the continuing efforts to humanize him—even at the beginning of our history. Parson Mason Weems, his most famous biographer, was less of a churchman



*As the general who won the Revolutionary War, George Washington was the only person in the infant American nation who had support in every section of the country. He cultivated a stiff, impersonal image based on the "classic hero" he so admired. Wood concludes that, when Washington surrendered his sword to the Constitutional Congress, he shocked Europe by "gaining his power by his readiness to give it up." (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Charles Allen Munn, 1924)*

than he was a hustling entrepreneur. He was ready when Washington died in 1799: "I've something to whisper in your lug," Weems wrote to his publisher Matthew Carey a month after the great man's death. "Washington you know, is gone! Millions are gaping to read something about him. I am very nearly primed and cocked for 'em." Weems had his book out within a year.

The most famous anecdotes about Washington's early life come from Weems. He wanted to capture the inner private man—to show the early events that shaped Washington's character, even if he had to make them up. Weems presumed that the source of

---

Gordon S. Wood, "The Greatness of George Washington," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 68, no. 2 (Spring, 1992), pp. 189–207. Reprinted by permission.

Washington's reputation for truthfulness lay in his youth. He tells a story that he said he had heard from Washington's nurse. It was, he says, "too valuable to be lost, too true to be doubted." This was, of course, the story of the cherry tree about whose chopping down Washington could not tell a lie.

Despite the continued popularity of Parson Weems' attempt to humanize him, Washington remained distant and unapproachable, almost unreal and un-human. There have been periodic efforts to bring him down to earth, to expose his foibles, to debunk his fame, but he remained, and remains, massively monumental. By our time in the late 20th century he seems so far removed from us as to be virtually incomprehensible. He seems to come from another time and another place—from another world.

And that's the whole point about him: he does come from another world. And his countrymen realized it even before he died in 1799. He is the only truly classical hero we have ever had. He acquired at once a world-wide reputation as a great patriot-hero.

And he knew it. He was well aware of his reputation and his fame earned as the commander-in-chief of the American revolutionary forces. That awareness of his heroic stature and his character as a republican leader was crucial to Washington. It affected nearly everything he did for the rest of his life.

Washington was a thoroughly 18th-century figure. So much so, that he quickly became an anachronism. He belonged to the pre-democratic and pre-egalitarian world of the 18th century, to a world very different from the world that would follow. No wonder then that he seems to us so remote and so distant. He really is. He belonged to a world we have lost and we were losing even as Washington lived.

In many respects Washington was a very unlikely hero. To be sure, he had all the physical attributes of a classical hero. He was very tall by contemporary standards, and was heavily built and a superb athlete. Physically he had what both men and women ad-

mired. He was both a splendid horseman at a time when that skill really counted and an extraordinarily graceful dancer. And naturally he loved both riding and dancing. He always moved with dignity and looked the leader.

Yet those who knew him well and talked with him were often disappointed. He never seemed to have very much to say. He was most certainly *not* what we would today call an "intellectual." We cannot imagine him, say, expressing his views on Plato in the way Jefferson and John Adams did in their old age. Adams was especially contemptuous of Washington's intellectual abilities. It was certain, said Adams, that Washington was not a scholar. "That he was too illiterate, unread for his station and reputation is equally past dispute."

Adam's judgment is surely too harsh. Great men in the 18th century did not have to be scholars or intellectuals. But there is no doubt that Washington was not a learned man, especially in comparison with the other Founding Fathers. He was very ill at ease in abstract discussions. Even Jefferson, who was usually generous in his estimates of his friends, said that Washington's "colloquial talents were not above mediocrity." He had "neither copiousness of ideas nor fluency of words."

Washington was not an intellectual, but he was a man of affairs. He knew how to run his plantation and make it pay. He certainly ran Mount Vernon better than Jefferson ran Monticello. Washington's heart was always at Mount Vernon. He thought about it all the time. Even when he was president he devoted a great amount of his energy worrying about the fence posts of his plantation, and his letters dealing with the details of running Mount Vernon were longer than those dealing with the running of the federal government.

But being a man of affairs and running his plantation or even the federal government efficiently were not what made him a world-renowned hero. What was it that lay behind his extraordinary reputation, his greatness?

His military exploits were of course crucial. But Washington was not really a traditional military hero. He did not resemble Alexander, Caesar, Cromwell, or Marlborough; his military achievements were nothing compared to those Napoleon would soon have. Washington had no smashing, stunning victories. He was not a military genius, and his tactical and strategic maneuvers were not the sort that awed men. Military glory was *not* the source of his reputation. Something else was involved.

Washington's genius, his greatness, lay in his character. He was, as Chateaubriand said, a "hero of an unprecedented kind." There had never been a great man quite like Washington before. Washington became a great man and was acclaimed as a classical hero because of the way he conducted himself during times of temptation. It was his moral character that set him off from other men.

Washington fit the 18th-century image of a great man, of a man of virtue. This virtue was not given to him by nature. He had to work for it, to cultivate it, and everyone sensed that. Washington was a self-made hero, and this impressed an 18th-century enlightened world that put great stock in men controlling both their passions and their destinies. Washington seemed to possess a self-cultivated nobility.

He was in fact a child of the 18th-century Enlightenment. He was very much a man of his age, and he took its moral standards more seriously than most of his contemporaries. Washington's Enlightenment, however, was not quite that of Jefferson or Franklin. Although he was conventionally enlightened about religion, "being no bigot myself to any mode of worship," he had no passionate dislike of the clergy and organized Christianity, as Jefferson did. And although he admired learning, he was not a man of science like Franklin. Like many other 18th-century Englishmen, he did *not* believe, as he put it, that "becoming a mere scholar is a desirable education for a gentleman."

Washington's Enlightenment was a much more down-to-earth affair, concerned with behavior and

with living in the everyday-world of people. His Enlightenment involved what eventually came to be called cultivation and civilization. He lived his life by the book—not the book of military rules but the book of gentility. He was as keenly aware as any of his fellow Americans of the 18th-century conventions that defined what a proper gentleman was.

Such conventions were expressed in much of the writing of the Enlightenment. The thousands of etiquette books, didactic stories, *Spectator* papers, Hogarth prints, gentlemanly magazines, classical histories—all were designed to teach Englishmen manners, civility, politeness, and virtue. Out of all this writing and art emerged an ideal of what it was to be both enlightened and civilized, and a virtuous leader. Our perpetuation of a liberal arts education in our colleges and universities is a present-day reminder of the origins of this ideal; for the English conception of a liberally educated gentleman had its modern beginnings in the 18th century.

An enlightened, civilized man was disinterested and impartial, not swayed by self-interest and self-profit. He was cosmopolitan; he stood above all local and parochial considerations and was willing to sacrifice his personal desires for the greater good of his community or his country. He was a man of reason who resisted the passions most likely to afflict great men, that is, ambition and avarice. Such a liberal, enlightened gentleman avoided enthusiasms and fanaticisms of all sorts, especially those of religion. Tolerance and liberality were his watchwords. Politeness and compassion toward his fellow man were his manners. Behaving in this way was what constituted being civilized.

Washington was thoroughly caught up in this enlightened promotion of gentility and civility, this rational rolling back of parochialism, fanaticism, and barbarism. He may have gone to church regularly, but he was not an emotionally religious person. In all of his writings there is no mention of Christ, and God is generally referred to as "the great disposer of human events." Washington loved Addison's play

*Cato* and saw it over and over and incorporated its lines into his correspondence. The play, very much an Enlightenment tract, helped to teach him what it meant to be liberal and virtuous, what it meant to be a stoical classical hero. He had the play put on for his troops during the terrible winter at Valley Forge in 1778.

One of the key documents of Washington's life is his "Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation," a collection of 110 maxims that Washington wrote down sometime before his 16th birthday. The maxims were originally drawn from a 17th-century etiquette book and were copied by the young autodidact. They dealt with everything from how to treat one's betters ("In speaking to men of Quality do not lean nor Look them full in the Face") to how to present one's countenance ("Do not Puff up the Cheeks, Do not Loll out the tongue, rub the Hands, or beard, thrust out the lips, or bite them or keep the Lips too open or too Close").

All the Founding Fathers were aware of these enlightened conventions, and all in varying degrees tried to live up to them. But no one was more serious in following them than Washington. It is this purposefulness that gave his behavior such a copy-book character. He was obsessed with having things in fashion and was fastidious about his appearance to the world. It was as if he were always on stage, acting a part. He was very desirous not to offend, and he exquisitely shaped his remarks to fit the person to whom he was writing—so much so that some historians have accused him of deceit. "So anxious was he to appear neat and correct in his letters," recalled Benjamin Rush, that he was known to "copy over a letter of 2 or 3 sheets of paper because there were a few erasures on it." He wanted desperately to know what were the proper rules of behavior for a liberal gentleman, and when he discovered those rules he stuck by them with an earnestness that awed his contemporaries. His remarkable formality and stiffness in company came from his very self-conscious cultiva-

tion of what he considered proper, genteel, classical behavior.

Washington and Franklin, both children of the Enlightenment, had very different personalities, but among the Founding Fathers they shared one important thing. Neither of them went to college; neither had a formal liberal arts education. This deficiency deeply affected both of them, but Washington let it show. Washington always remained profoundly respectful of formal education. Colleges like William and Mary were always an "Object of Veneration" to him. His lack of a formal liberal arts education gave him a modesty he never lost. He repeatedly expressed his "consciousness of a defective education," and he remained quiet in the presence of sharp and sparkling minds. He was forever embarrassed that he had never learned any foreign languages. In the 1780's he refused invitations to visit France because he felt it would be humiliating for someone of his standing to have to converse through an interpreter. He said that it was his lack of a formal education that kept him from setting down on paper his recollections of the Revolution. It was widely rumored that his aides composed his best letters as commander-in-chief. If so, it is not surprising that he was diffident in company. Some even called it "shyness," but whatever the source, this reticence was certainly not the usual characteristic of a great man. "His modesty is astonishing, particularly to a Frenchman," noted Brissot de Warville. "He speaks of the American War as if he had *not* been its leader." This modesty only added to his gravity and severity. "Most people say and do too much," one friend recalled. "Washington . . . never fell into this common error."

Yet it was in the political world that Washington made his most theatrical gesture, his most moral mark, and there the results were monumental. The greatest act of his life, the one that made him famous, was his resignation as commander-in-chief of the American forces. This act, together with his 1783 circular letter to the states in which he promised to retire from

public life, was his “legacy” to his countrymen. No American leader has ever left a more important legacy.

Following the signing of the peace treaty and British recognition of American independence, Washington stunned the world when he surrendered his sword to the Congress on Dec. 23, 1783 and retired to his farm at Mount Vernon. This was a highly symbolic act, a very self-conscious and unconditional withdrawal from the world of politics. Here was the commander-in-chief of the victorious army putting down his sword and promising not to take “any share in public business hereafter.” Washington even resigned from his local vestry in Virginia in order to make his separation from the political world complete.

His retirement from power had a profound effect everywhere in the Western world. It was extraordinary, it was unprecedented in modern times—a victorious general surrendering his arms and returning to his farm. Cromwell, William of Orange, Marlborough—all had sought political rewards commensurate with their military achievements. Though it was widely thought that Washington could have become king or dictator, he wanted nothing of the kind. He was sincere in his desire for all the soldiers “to return to our Private Stations in the bosom of a free, peaceful and happy Country,” and everyone recognized his sincerity. It filled them with awe. Washington’s retirement, said the painter John Trumbull writing from London in 1784, “excites the astonishment and admiration of this part of the world. ’Tis a Conduct so novel, so unconceivable to People, who, far from giving up powers they possess, are willing to convulse the empire to acquire more.” King George III supposedly predicted that if Washington retired from public life and returned to his farm, “he will be the greatest man in the world.”

Washington was not naïve. He was well aware of the effect his resignation would have. He was trying to live up to the age’s image of a classical disinterested patriot who devotes his life to his country, and

he knew at once that he had acquired instant fame as a modern Cincinnatus. His reputation in the 1780’s as a great classical hero was international, and it was virtually unrivaled. Franklin was his only competitor, but Franklin’s greatness still lay in his being a scientist, not a man of public affairs. Washington was a living embodiment of all that classical republican virtue the age was eagerly striving to recover.

Despite his outward modesty, Washington realized he was an extraordinary man, and he was not ashamed of it. He lived in an era when distinctions of rank and talent were not only accepted but celebrated. He took for granted the differences between himself and more ordinary men. And when he could not take those differences for granted he cultivated them. He used his natural reticence to reinforce the image of a stern and forbidding classical hero. His aloofness was notorious, and he worked at it. When the painter Gilbert Stuart had uncharacteristic difficulty in putting Washington at ease during a sitting for a portrait, Stuart in exasperation finally pleaded, “Now sir, you must let me forget that you are General Washington and that I am Stuart, the painter,” Washington’s reply chilled the air: “Mr. Stuart need never feel the need of forgetting who he is or who General Washington is.” No wonder the portraits look stiff.

Washington had earned his reputation, his “character,” as a moral hero, and he did not want to dissipate it. He spent the rest of his life guarding and protecting his reputation, and worrying about it. He believed Franklin made a mistake going back into public life in Pennsylvania in the 1780’s. Such involvement in politics, he thought, could only endanger Franklin’s already achieved international standing. In modern eyes Washington’s concern for his reputation is embarrassing; it seems obsessive and egotistical. But his contemporaries understood. All gentlemen tried scrupulously to guard their reputations, which is what they meant by their honor. Honor was the esteem in which they were held, and

they prized it. To have honor across space and time was to have fame, and fame, "the ruling passion of the noblest minds," was what the Founding Fathers were after, Washington above all. And he got it, sooner and in greater degree than any other of his contemporaries. And naturally, having achieved what all his fellow Revolutionaries still anxiously sought, he was reluctant to risk it.

Many of his actions after 1783 can be understood only in terms of this deep concern for his reputation as a virtuous leader. He was constantly on guard and very sensitive to any criticism. Jefferson said no one was more sensitive. He judged all his actions by what people might think of them. This sometimes makes him seem silly to modern minds, but not to those of the 18th century. In that very suspicious age where people were acutely "jealous" of what great men were up to, Washington thought it important that people understand his motives. The reality was not enough; he had to *appear* virtuous. He was obsessed that he not seem base, mean, avaricious, or unduly ambitious. No one, said Jefferson, worked harder than Washington in keeping "motives of interest of consanguinity, of friendship or hatred" from influencing him. He had a lifelong preoccupation with his reputation for "disinterestedness" and how best to use that reputation for the good of his country. This preoccupation explains the seemingly odd fastidiousness and the caution of his behavior in the 1780's.

One of the most revealing incidents occurred in the winter of 1784-85. Washington was led into temptation, and it was agony. The Virginia General Assembly presented him with 150 shares in the James River and Potomac canal companies in recognition of his services to the state and the cause of canal-building. What should he do? He did not feel he could accept the shares. Acceptance might be "considered in the same light as a pension" and might compromise his reputation for virtue. Yet he believed passionately in what the canal companies

were doing and had long dreamed of making a fortune from such canals. Moreover, he did not want to show "disrespect" to the Assembly or to appear "contentiously disinterested" by refusing this gift.

Few decisions in Washington's career caused more distress than this one. He wrote to everyone he knew—to Jefferson, to Governor Patrick Henry, to William Grayson, to Benjamin Harrison, to George William Fairfax, to Nathanael Greene, even to Lafayette—seeking "the best information and advice" on the disposition of the shares. "How would this matter be viewed by the eyes of the world?" he asked. Would not his reputation for virtue be harmed? Would not accepting the shares "deprive me of the principal thing which is laudable in my conduct?"

The situation is humorous today, but it was not to Washington. He suffered real anguish. Jefferson eventually found the key to Washington's anxieties and told him that declining to accept the shares would only add to his reputation for disinterestedness. So Washington gave them away to the college that eventually became Washington and Lee.

Washington suffered even more anguish over the decision to attend the Philadelphia Convention in 1787. Many believed that his presence was absolutely necessary for the effectiveness of the Convention, but the situation was tricky. He wrote to friends exploring them to tell him "confidentially what the public expectation is on this head, that is, whether I will or ought to be there?" How would his presence be seen, how would his motives be viewed? If he attended, would he be thought to have violated his pledge to withdraw from public life? But, if he did not attend, would his staying away be thought to be a "dereliction to Republicanism"? Should he squander his reputation on something that might not work?

What if the Convention should fail? The delegates would have to return home, he said, "chagrined at their ill success and disappointment. This would be a



disagreeable circumstance for any one of them to be in; but more particularly so, for a person in my situation." Even James Madison had second thoughts about the possibility of misusing such a precious asset as Washington's reputation. What finally convinced Washington to attend the Convention was the fear that people might think he wanted the federal government to fail so that he could manage a military takeover. So in the end he decided, as Madison put it, "to forsake the honorable retreat to which he had retired, and risk the reputation he had so deservedly acquired." No action could be more virtuous. "Secure as he was in his fame," wrote Henry Knox with some awe, "he has again committed it to the mercy of events. Nothing but the critical situation of his country would have induced him to so hazardous a conduct."

When the Convention met, Washington was at once elected its president. His presence and his leadership undoubtedly gave the Convention and the proposed Constitution a prestige that they otherwise could not have had. His backing of the Constitution was essential to its eventual ratification. "Be assured," James Monroe told Jefferson, "his influence carried this government." Washington, once committed to the Constitution, worked hard for its acceptance. He wrote letters to friends and let his enthusiasm for the new federal government be known. Once he had identified himself publicly with the new Constitution he became very anxious to have it accepted. Its ratification was a kind of ratification of himself.

After the Constitution was established, Washington still thought he could retire to the domestic tranquility of Mount Vernon. But everyone else expected that he would become president of the new national government. He was already identified with the country. People said he was denied children in his private life so he could be the father of his country. He had to be the president. Indeed, the Convention had made the new chief executive so strong,

so kinglike, precisely because the delegates expected Washington to be the first president.

Once again this widespread expectation aroused all his old anxieties about his reputation for disinterestedness and the proper role for a former military leader. Had he not promised the country that he would permanently retire from public life? How could he then now assume the presidency without being "chargeable with levity and inconsistency; if not with rashness and ambition?" His protests were sincere. He had so much to lose, yet he did not want to appear "too solicitous for my reputation."

Washington's apparent egotism and his excessive coyness, his extreme reluctance to get involved in public affairs and endanger his reputation, have not usually been well received by historians. Douglas Southall Freeman, his great biographer, thought that Washington in the late 1780's was "too zealously attentive to his prestige, his reputation and his popularity—too much the self-conscious national hero and too little the daring patriot." Historians might not understand his behavior, but his contemporaries certainly did. They rarely doubted that Washington was trying *always* to act in a disinterested and patriotic way. His anxious queries about how this or that would look to the world, his hesitations about serving or not serving, his expressions of scruples and qualms—all were part of his strenuous effort to live up to the classical idea of a virtuous leader.

He seemed to epitomize public virtue and the proper character of a republican ruler. Even if John Adams was not all that impressed with George Washington, Adam's wife Abigail was certainly taken with him. She admired his restraint and trusted him. "If he was not really one of the best-intentioned men in the world," she wrote, "he might be a very dangerous one." As Gary Wills has so nicely put it, Washington gained his power by his readiness to give it up.

As president he continued to try to play the role he thought circumstances demanded. He knew that the new government was fragile and needed dignity.

People found that dignity in his person. Madison believed that Washington was the only part of the new government that captured the minds of the people. He fleshed out the executive, established its independence, and gave the new government the pomp and ceremony many thought it needed.

Sometimes it had more pomp than even he enjoyed. His formal levees complete with silver buckles and powdered hair, were painful affairs for everyone. These receptions, held at first on Tuesday and Friday afternoons and later on only Tuesdays, were an opportunity for prominent men to meet the president. The invited guests, all men, entered the president's residence at three o'clock, where they found the president standing before the fireplace. Fifteen minutes were allowed for the guests to assemble in a circle. As each guest entered the room he walked to the President, bowed, and without speaking backed to his place in the circle. The only voice heard was that of a presidential aide softly announcing the names. Promptly on the quarter hour the doors were shut; the President then walked around the circle, addressed each man by name, and made some brief remark to him. He bowed but never shook hands. Washington thought that hand-shaking was much too familiar for the president to engage in; consequently he kept one hand occupied holding a fake hat and the other resting on his dress sword. When the president had rounded the circle, he returned to the fireplace and stood until, at a signal from an aide, each guest one by one went to him, bowed without saying anything, and left the room. However excruciatingly formal these levees were, Washington thought they would continue. He thus designed the bowed shaped of the Blue Room to accommodate them.

Although many critics thought that the levees smacked of the court life of kings of Europe, Washington was not a crypto-monarchist. He was a devoted republican, at heart just a country gentleman. Martha used to break up tea parties at 9:30 p.m. by saying that it was past the President's bedtime.

As president he tried to refuse accepting any salary just as he had as commander in chief. Still, he wanted to make the presidency "respectable," and he spared few expenses in doing so; he spent 7 per cent of his \$25,000 salary on liquor and wine for entertaining. He was especially interested in the size and character of the White House of the capital city that was named after him. The scale and grandeur of Washington, D.C., owe much to his vision and his backing of Pierre L'Enfant as architect. If Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson had had his way, L'Enfant would never have kept his job as long as he did, and the capital would have been smaller and less magnificent—perhaps something on the order of a college campus, like Jefferson's University of Virginia.

Washington was keenly aware that everything he did would set precedents for the future. "We are a young nation," he said, "and have a character to establish. It behooves us therefore to set out right, for first impressions will be lasting." It was an awesome responsibility. More than any of his contemporaries, he thought constantly of future generations, of "millions unborn," as he called them.

He created an independent role for the president and made the chief executive the dominant figure in the government.

He established crucial precedents, especially in limiting the Senate's role in advising the president in the making of treaties and the appointing of officials. In August 1789 he went to the Senate to get its advice and consent to a treaty he was negotiating with the Creek Indians. Vice President John Adams who presided read each section of the treaty and then asked the senators, How do you advise and consent? After a long silence, the senators, being senators, began debating each section, with Washington impatiently glaring down at them. Finally, one senator moved that the treaty and all the accompanying documents that the president had brought with him be submitted to a committee for study. Washington started up in what one senator called "a violent fret."

In exasperation he cried, "This defeats every purpose of my coming here." He calmed down, but when he finally left the Senate chamber, he was overheard to say he would "be damned if he ever went there again." He never did. The advice part of the Senate's role in treaty making was dropped.

The presidency is the powerful office it is in large part because of Washington's initial behavior. He understood power and how to use it. But as in the case of his career as commander-in-chief, his most important act as president was his giving up of the office.

The significance of his retirement from the presidency is easy for us to overlook, but his contemporaries knew what it meant. Most people assumed that Washington might be president as long as he lived, that he would be a kind of elective monarch—something not out of the question in the 18th century. Some people even expressed relief that he had no heirs. Thus his persistent efforts to retire from the presidency enhanced his moral authority and helped fix the republican character of the Constitution.

He very much wanted to retire in 1792, but his advisors and friends talked him into staying on for a second term. Madison admitted that when he had first urged Washington to accept the presidency he had told him that he could protect himself from accusations of overweening ambition by "a voluntary return to public life as soon as the state of the Government would permit." But the state of the government, said Madison, was not yet secure. So Washington reluctantly stayed on.

But in 1796 he was so determined to retire that no one could dissuade him, and his voluntary leaving of the office set a precedent that was not broken until FDR secured a third term in 1940. So strong was the sentiment for a two-term limit, however, that the tradition was written into the Constitution in the 22nd amendment in 1951. Washington's action in 1796 was of great significance. That the chief executive of a state should willingly relinquish his office was an object lesson in republicanism at a time

when the republican experiment throughout the Atlantic world was very much in doubt.

Washington's final years in retirement were not happy ones. The American political world was changing, becoming more partisan, and Washington struggled to comprehend these changes. During President Adams' administration he watched with dismay what he believed was the growing interference of the French government in American politics. For him the Jeffersonian Republican party had become "the French Party." It was, he said, "the curse of this country," threatening the stability and independence of the United States. He saw plots and enemies everywhere and became as much of a high-toned Federalist as Hamilton.

His fear was real; his sense of crisis was deep. He and other Federalists thought that the French might invade the country and together with "the French Party" overthrow the government. "Having Struggled for Eight or nine Years against the invasion of our rights by one power, and to establish an Independence of it," he wrote in 1798, "I could not remain an unconcerned spectator of the attempt of another Power to accomplish the same object, though in a different way." He thus listened attentively to all the urgent Federalist calls that he come out of retirement and head the army that the Congress had created to meet the French invasion.

Again he expressed reluctance, and asked whether becoming commander-in-chief would not be considered "a restless Act—evidence of my discontent in retirement." Yet in 1798 he was far more eager to step back into the breach and do his duty than he ever had been before. It was a measure of his despair with this "Age of Wonders"!

Before he could actually commit himself, however, President John Adams acted and, without his permission, appointed him commander of all the military forces of the United States. He accepted, but scarcely comprehended how it had all come about. The next thing he knew he was on his way to Philadelphia to organize the army. Events were out-

running his ability to control them or even to comprehend them, and he more and more saw himself caught up in “the designs of Providence.” His command was a disaster. He wrangled over the appointments of the second in command, intrigued against Adams, and interfered with his cabinet. When neither the French invasion nor the American army materialized, Washington crept back to Mount Vernon thoroughly disillusioned with the new ways of American politics.

In July 1799 Governor Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut with the backing of many Federalists urged Washington once again to stand for the presidency in 1800. Only Washington, Trumbull said, could unite the Federalists and save the country from “a French President.” Finally Washington had had enough. In his reply he no longer bothered with references to his reputation for disinterestedness and his desire to play the role of Cincinnatus. Instead he talked about the new political conditions that made his candidacy irrelevant. In this new democratic era of party politics, he said, “personal influence,” distinctions of character, no longer mattered. If the members of the Jeffersonian Republican party “set up a broomstick” as candidate and called it “a true son of Liberty” or “a Democrat” or “any other epithet that will suit their purpose,” it still would “command their votes in toto?” But, even worse, he said, the same was true of the Federalists. Party spirit now ruled all, and people voted only for their party candidate. Even if he were the Federalist candidate, Washington was “thoroughly convinced I should not draw a *single* vote from the anti-Federal side.” Therefore his standing for election made no sense; he would “stand upon no stronger ground than any other Federal character well supported.”

Washington wrote all this in anger and despair, but, though he exaggerated, he was essentially right. The political world was changing, becoming democratic, and parties, not great men, would soon become the objects of contention. To be sure, the American people continued to long for great heroes

as leaders, and from Jackson through Eisenhower they have periodically elected Washington *magnate* to the presidency.

But democracy made such great heroes no longer essential to the workings of American government. And Washington, more than any other single individual, was the one who made that democracy possible. As Jefferson said “the moderation and virtue of a single character . . . probably prevented this revolution from being closed, as most others have been, by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish.”

Washington was an extraordinary heroic man who made rule by more ordinary mortals possible. He virtually created the presidency, and gave it a dignity that through the years it has never lost. But, more important, he established the standard by which all subsequent presidents have been ultimately measured—not by the size of their electoral victories, not by their legislative programs, and not by the number of their vetoes, but by their moral character. Although we live in another world than his, his great legacy is still with us.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Why do you think that so many Americans, upon learning of Washington’s death, were eager to read about him and would probably have not accepted any biographer who was in any way critical of the former president? What in Washington’s background made him stand out from all of the other founding fathers?
- 2 Many of the founding fathers, Adams and Jefferson among them, were learned men with first-rate minds. Does Wood believe that Washington was an intellectual, a great conversationalist, or even a “military genius” in the same league with Caesar or Cromwell? How was Washington’s behavior influenced by the fact that he had never attended college? From your reading of selection 6, would you argue

that Franklin, the other founding father without a formal education, acted in a similar manner?

3 In what ways were Washington's moral code and personal behavior a product of the lessons he had learned from the writings of the Enlightenment? Wood observes that Washington was "always on stage, acting a part." Do you think that Washington was too interested in appearances? Given his value system, why was Washington anguished over the gift of shares in the canal companies and attendance at the Constitutional Convention?

4 Why did Washington's surrendering of his sword to the Continental Congress following the American Revolution astonish the world? Even in the twenty-first century, is it typical for military leaders of suc-

cessful revolutions to relinquish power? Still later he refused to run for a third term as president. Why would Wood state that this "was an object lesson in republicanism at a time when the republican experiment throughout the Atlantic world was very much in doubt"?

5 How did the formal levees or receptions symbolize Washington's character, personality, and perception of what the presidency should represent? Would you have felt comfortable at such a gathering?

6 Near the end of his life Washington seemed disillusioned with public service because political parties mattered more than the moral fiber of their leaders. Is this a continuing problem in the history of our country?

