

Washington, George (11 Feb. 1732-14 Dec. 1799), first president of the United States, was born in Westmoreland County, Virginia, the son of Augustine Washington and Mary Ball. His father, a prosperous planter and entrepreneur, died when George was eleven, leaving most of his considerable estate to George's half brother Lawrence. Despite his limited means and fewer than eight years of schooling, George was determined to improve himself and to earn a place in the highly cultivated plantation gentry. He was stimulated by the example of Lawrence, who had been educated in England, and by regular exposure to the aristocratic Fairfax family into which Lawrence married.

The gentry to which the young man aspired had adopted stylized forms of behavior and embraced values that became central components of Washington's makeup. Some practices were less than admirable; for example, Washington shared with the gentry a passion for gambling. The gentry was also avid in the pursuit of wealth, mainly through land speculation and tobacco planting, and exploited slave labor with no qualms. There was, however, nothing miserly about the society; indeed Virginians sought riches mainly to be able to offer lavish hospitality and to pay for extravagant consumption (Washington spent enormous amounts on clothing, for a gentleman must be clad as a gentleman). Most important, the gentry embraced English country party ideology, which equated manhood with independence and independence with the ownership of large tracts of land as well as proficiency with firearms and skill in horsemanship.

Another crucial element in manhood was self-control, and that did not come easily to Washington, for he could be impetuous, and his temper was explosive. He learned to discipline himself mainly through the use of two techniques, both of which were conventional in the eighteenth century, though Washington carried them (and they carried him) much further than ordinary men. One was related to the principles of honor, shame, and face: seeking the approval of others. Washington was passionately concerned with his public reputation, with winning the approbation of what he called the "truly valuable part of mankind." The other involved role-playing. It was common practice in polite society and public life in eighteenth-century England and America to select a persona, a role, a "character," and attempt to play that part consistently until it became a second nature. Washington played a succession of characters, each more exalted than the last, until he transformed himself into a man of almost extrahuman virtue.

Virginia society was highly stratified and deferential but far from static. To move upward in it, one needed patrons, and for a time Washington had them in his brother and in the Fairfaxes. The first tangible fruit of his connections came in 1748, when George William Fairfax, son of the lord, took him on a surveying expedition in the Shenandoah Valley wilderness. Washington was immediately enamored of the western frontier as well as of surveying. He studied surveying, became licensed, and at the age of seventeen began a career as a surveyor. At eighteen he made the first of what would be many purchases of western lands--1,459 acres.

In 1751 Washington accompanied Lawrence, who was gravely ill, on a trip to the West Indies. George contracted smallpox while on the islands but survived with an immunity that would stand him in good stead during his military career. Lawrence's health did not benefit from the trip as had been hoped, and he died shortly after their return home. Soon thereafter George leased Lawrence's estate, "Mount Vernon," from his widow, and in due course he acquired the property outright.

Beginning of Washington's Military Career

Meanwhile, a concatenation of forces was about to propel the aspiring gentleman onto a larger stage. The colonial governor appointed George to a post that Lawrence had held, that of adjutant commander of a militia district with the rank of major. The appointment was for the southern district, far from home, but in short order Washington was able to arrange for command of the Northern Neck District, which included the northwest. This was a propitious time and place for a twenty-year-old with no military training to be appointed to such a position, for international conflict was brewing. Large numbers of speculators were casting hungry eyes on trans-Allegheny lands, and the French were moving into the area and seeking alliances with the Six Nations so as to monopolize the lucrative fur trade.

A report reached Virginia lieutenant governor [Robert Dinwiddie](#) that a sizable French force was preparing to build fortifications at the forks of the Ohio River, an area claimed by several colonies and the British Crown. Washington volunteered to investigate, and Dinwiddie sent him to warn French officials off the premises and to firm relations with the local Indians. Accompanied by the frontiersman [Christopher Gist](#) and four bearers, Washington set out late in November 1753. He met with a mixed reception from the Indians and found one detachment of French. The French declined to accept Dinwiddie's message of warning and instead sent Washington northward to another French post that sent him even farther, almost to Lake Erie. There the officer told him he would have to call on the French governor at Montreal. Washington refused, whereupon the officer accepted the letter but rejected its contents. On the return to Virginia, Washington and his party were forced to abandon their horses; they braved fierce cold, survived an attack by a treacherous guide, and arrived home in mid-January. The trip was scarcely a success, but it taught Washington much about field survival and earned him favor in the colonial capital, Williamsburg.

The favor was such that Dinwiddie named Washington, with the rank of lieutenant colonel, to lead a detachment of 159 militia into the Ohio River valley to defend an English fort being built there. Other troops and a senior officer were scheduled to follow, but few troops arrived, and the officer died after being thrown from his horse. Washington, pretty much on his own, was greeted by bad news: the French had captured the fort (naming it Fort Duquesne), they numbered more than a thousand, and most of the Indians had decided to support them. Rather than retreat, Washington built a small fort (Fort Necessity) about forty miles away and determined to attack any French forces he encountered.

On 28 May 1754, with a band of forty militiamen and a handful of Indians, Washington met a French and Indian party about the same size and destroyed it. He wrote an account of the action to a younger brother--subsequently published all over America and as far away as London--in which he said, "I heard the bullets whistle, and, believe me, there is something charming in the sound." The attack in fact had been rash, for it was against a mission much like Washington's had been the year before, namely one charged with issuing a peaceful warning. Moreover, the head of the French party, Joseph Coulon, sieur de Jumonville, was killed, and the French protested

vehemently, calling the killing an "assassination." In the English-speaking portion of the world, however, Washington was regarded as an intrepid warrior.

Washington's next campaign was likewise ill considered and likewise won him renown as a fighting man. Receiving word that the French were sending 800 soldiers and 400 Indians to face his somewhat enlarged force of about 300, Washington was determined to hold Fort Necessity. After a few hours of ferocious fire on 3 July, during which Washington lost a third of his men, a driving rain flooded the fort and made surrender inevitable. The French agreed to lenient terms, allowing Washington and his men to return home, but the French commander, Jumonville's brother, through deviousness on the part of the translators, tricked Washington into signing a document stating that the French siege had been provoked by the murder of their "diplomat," Jumonville. News of the surrender and its guilty admission was greeted by the British as "the most infamous a British subject ever put his hand to."

In Virginia and much of the rest of America, however, Washington was hailed as a hero who had led his inexperienced little band in a gallant stand. Though a seasoned commander might have acted with greater prudence, none could have displayed more definitely the essential qualities of leadership than Washington. A number of personal attributes contributed to making him a natural leader. Washington had a commanding physical appearance. He was more than six feet three inches tall, weighed about 180 pounds, and had broad shoulders, an erect bearing, and an alert, intelligent mien. He was magnificent astride a horse. He was utterly devoid of fear. Perhaps most important he had an aura of invincibility. During his long military career he was fired on at close range, bullets repeatedly tore his clothes, horses were shot from under him, but he was not once wounded. He was, in sum, a leader others would follow.

Washington's Role in the French and Indian War

As full-scale war between Britain and France neared, Washington was eager to participate but appalled to learn that the British government had ordered that no colonials could hold a rank higher than captain. He forthwith resigned, but when General [Edward Braddock](#) requested that Washington be his aide, he agreed to serve as a "volunteer" without rank. The Braddock expedition to regain control of the forks of the Ohio River started in the spring of 1755 and reached a point ten miles from Fort Duquesne early in July. Washington warned the general that the Frenchmen would not fight in orderly fashion, as they did in Europe, and urged that the British attack Indian-style, as bands of individuals. Braddock refused; he also refused, somewhat contemptuously, Washington's request to lead the provincial troops separately and "engage the enemy in their own way." Instead, the British stumbled into an ambush and were slaughtered. Most of the British officers, Braddock included, died; Washington managed to lead the survivors to safety.

Three years of frustration followed. After Braddock's defeat, the British shifted their concentration to Canadian objectives, which left the Virginia frontier exposed. For defense the Virginia Assembly created a conscript army, authorized at 1,200 to 2,000 troops, and Washington was appointed colonel of the "Virginia Regiment and Commander in Chief of all

Virginia forces." Because the Indians attacked in raids on isolated settlements and then disappeared into the woods, the Virginia Regiment was all but useless. Moreover, a vexing wrangle concerning rank arose. Strategically, Washington's most important outpost was Fort Cumberland in Maryland. A captain there claimed he outranked Washington because his commission was in the regular British army, and he was supported by Maryland's governor. Washington and Dinwiddie protested and were referred to Governor [William Shirley](#) of Massachusetts, who had been appointed acting commander of the British forces in America. Washington wrote Shirley, maintaining that giving preferential treatment to regular army officers denied him the full rights of English subjects. Receiving no favorable reply, Washington went to Boston on horseback in February 1756 to plead his case. Shirley's ruling solved the immediate problem but avoided the larger issue of relative ranking: he declared that the captain's commission was invalid and thus that Washington was the ranking officer in Maryland. Throughout 1756 and 1757 Washington continued his efforts at frontier defense--gaining valuable administrative experience and learning to despise the militias as much as he despised the supercilious British.

Then, in 1758, the war and Washington's first military career came to an anticlimactic end. The British rescinded the policy of discrimination against American officers, and Washington was able, without feeling demeaned, to join his regiment with the 7,000 regulars under General [John Forbes](#). They were sent to lay siege to Fort Duquesne. When the British encamped near the fort on 24 November, they learned that the French had burned the fort and disappeared down the river. The campaign was ended.

The legacy of Washington's service in the French and Indian War was threefold: he was famous in America; he was notorious in Britain; and he was possessed of great hostility toward the mother country.

Six weeks after the destruction of Duquesne, Washington was married and plunged again into his quest to become a wealthy planter. The marriage itself, to the widow Martha Dandridge Custis ([Martha Dandridge Custis Washington](#)), contributed much toward his goal, for by it he obtained control of an estate valued at more than £23,000. But, unlike most tobacco planters, Washington worked hard and systematically to enlarge his holdings, studying diligently, experimenting endlessly, becoming a "scientific farmer." His tobacco was never of the finest quality--he believed his London correspondents deliberately undergraded it as well as overcharged him for his purchases--and to compensate, he did another thing his peers rarely did, namely diversify. He grew wheat, erected a lumber mill and a brickyard, and engaged his skilled slaves in a variety of crafts. Meanwhile, as befitted his station, he entertained lavishly (more than 2,000 guests in a six-year period), served in the colonial assembly from 1759 until the Revolution, and also served as a county justice and vestryman in his parish.

The Fight for American Liberty as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army

As the strains between Britain and the colonies developed, Washington regarded British policies from a personal, not an ideological, point of view, and his attitude wavered accordingly. He thought the Stamp Act unconstitutional but, since it scarcely affected him, not worth the resistance it inspired. He thought the Townshend duties equally unconstitutional, but he was at first too concerned with personal business to give them attention. Then, early in 1769, he veered toward intense opposition to what he called "our lordly Masters in Great Britain," and, long before the most radical patriots went so far, he indicated a willingness to fight for American liberty, though only as a last resort. After the repeal of the Townshend duties and until the Boston Tea Party he again paid more attention to private business than to public affairs, but in response to the Intolerable Acts, he struck a stance of militant resistance from which he never departed. As a delegate to the First Continental Congress in the fall of 1774 he joined ranks with radical New Englanders.

Fighting broke out the following spring, and in June 1775, when Congress adopted the rebel forces besieging Boston as a Continental army, Washington was appointed its commander in chief. The choice was scarcely a surprise. He was the best-known fighting man in America, and [John Adams](#) (who proposed his name) and others understood that if the army was to be supported in all the colonies, a southerner should command it. Washington, for his part, though characteristically professing that he did not think himself "equal to the command," had had a splendid buff and blue general's uniform made and wore it at the sessions of Congress.

The siege of Boston lasted eight months after Washington assumed command, during which time he was beset by several problems that would plague him for years. The soldiers were untrained, ill equipped, poorly organized, and undisciplined. Washington began to impose order by instituting a brutal system of corporal punishments, but his efforts were hampered because Congress, fearing the perils of a "standing army," refused to make the terms of enlistments more than a few months. Thus Washington scarcely had one group trained before the enlistments expired and new soldiers appeared. Congress itself was inept, lacking an executive arm and arriving at orders through committees, and members of the radical republican faction led by the Adamses of Massachusetts and the Lees of Virginia were fearful lest Washington be too successful. Finally, until mid-winter the Americans had virtually no artillery. When [Henry Knox](#) arrived in January 1776 with cannon and mortars, Washington mounted them on Dorchester Heights overlooking Boston. Violent weather prevented the Americans from storming the city, but the artillery made the position of the British untenable, and in March they evacuated Boston.

The summer campaign, however, nearly proved to be a catastrophe. In July General [William Howe](#) landed with 30,000 British troops on Staten Island, looking to take New York as permanent headquarters. Washington anticipated the action but had only 10,000 men at his command and was forced to divide them. Howe defeated an American force at small cost, but by dint of skillful maneuvers Washington escaped with most of his army to Manhattan. Howe pursued relentlessly, and the Americans retreated in panic to the north of the island. There they regrouped and from October to December proceeded across the Hudson and into Pennsylvania. Congress fled Philadelphia, having first vested Washington with almost dictatorial emergency powers.

Long-Range Strategy for Fighting the War and Boosting Morale

On the basis of his setbacks, Washington decided on his long-range strategy. To Congress he wrote that "we should on all Occasions avoid a general Action, or put anything to the Risque, unless compelled by a necessity, into which we ought never to be drawn." The trouble with this Fabian strategy was that it would take time to raise and train a permanent army--after Congress finally authorized one--and it would be difficult to keep up the morale of the citizenry, the Congress, and the troops until then.

To boost morale and buy time, Washington conceived a brilliant stroke. Howe had withdrawn most of his troops to winter quarters in New York but left garrisons at Trenton and four other New Jersey towns. On 26 December, having learned that the garrison of Hessian mercenaries in Trenton was ill prepared to fight, Washington sent three detachments to cross the ice-choked Delaware River; only one, a force of 2,400 led by Washington himself, successfully made the crossing, nine miles north of the town. The Americans split, circled the objective, and invaded the camp at Trenton. Surprise was total; the Americans killed thirty Hessians and captured 918, suffering only five wounded. The British rushed a large force from New York to Princeton, but Washington's army outmaneuvered and routed them, leaving the British in control only of the area immediately surrounding New York City.

In 1777 the British broadened their strategy, sending an army down from Canada under [John Burgoyne](#) and another under Howe by sea from New York to Chesapeake Bay and overland to Philadelphia, the objects being to take New England and New York out of the war and to isolate the other states. Howe's expedition set out late in July. Washington attempted to stop him at Brandywine Creek early in September, but his efforts miscarried and he succeeded merely in delaying the occupation of Philadelphia by two weeks. On 4 October Washington attacked Howe's main encampment in the Philadelphia suburb of Germantown, but his clever and intricate plan was frustrated when his troops got confused in a heavy fog. He then repaired to Valley Forge to establish winter quarters. In the meantime, Burgoyne's invasion of upstate New York was foiled: under the command of General [Horatio Gates](#), but largely due to [Benedict Arnold's](#) heroics on the battlefield, the Americans forced Burgoyne to surrender his entire army of 5,700 at Saratoga.

The aftermath of Saratoga gave Washington some of his darkest hours. Smelling opportunity to crush Howe and end the war quickly, he dispatched one of his aides-de-camp, [Alexander Hamilton](#), to General Gates with orders to bring his army to join Washington's forthwith. Gates, a vain and ambitious man, smelled a different opportunity, namely to replace Washington as commander in chief, and he refused. At the same time Gates apparently joined with an Irish adventurer, [Thomas Conway](#), to try to discredit and displace Washington. Discovery of this "cabal" caused Congress to dissociate itself from the attempt and, given the severe suffering the army was enduring at Valley Forge, congressmen were forced to affirm Washington's command. Indeed, Washington had grown so popular that he might have overthrown the Congress had he chosen to. But he was far from possessed of the ambition his enemies feared, and he was always deferential to civilian authority, refusing to exercise the extraordinary powers Congress

sometimes vested in him lest he alienate the people. He understood that without popular support the Revolution could not succeed. He also understood that he must embody the Revolution as the champion of lawful civilian government.

The French Alliance (1778)

He had another chance at destroying the British during the summer of 1778. After arrival in Paris of the news of the battle of Saratoga, the French, previously supporting the Americans with loans and materiel, now concluded an alliance with the United States and prepared to send troops and fleets immediately. Sir Henry Clinton, who had replaced Howe, heard reports that a French fleet was heading to Philadelphia and decided to evacuate the city and cross New Jersey into New York. Clinton's lines being overextended, Washington ordered an attack that probably would have succeeded, for the American troops fought with a discipline that they had not previously had, but General [Charles Lee](#) failed to obey Washington's orders, and the British slipped away.

The next three years saw a worsening of the cause. The French alliance, instead of stimulating the Americans, induced a lethargy based on the expectation that France would win independence for them. Repeatedly, efforts to mount a combined Franco-American campaign miscarried. Meanwhile the British invaded the Deep South, occupying Georgia and much of the Carolinas. Gates was routed by [Lord Cornwallis](#) at Camden, South Carolina, and he fled in disgrace. Benedict Arnold sold out to the enemy. Twice groups of Washington's troops mutinied. Congress was bankrupt.

The End of the Revolutionary War

The tide turned suddenly in 1781. Congress reorganized its finances in a way that enabled Washington to keep his troops in the field a while longer. He and the French general, the [Comte de Rochambeau](#), directed their armies southward to confront Cornwallis, who was advancing on Virginia across the several peninsulas that mark the coast. Cornwallis was safe so long as he had naval cover, but in September the French and British fleets met, and the British were forced to draw off toward New York for repairs. Cornwallis was trapped on the Yorktown peninsula without naval protection. The French and American armies began a siege, and on 17 October the entire British army of 8,000 was forced to capitulate. For practical purposes, the war was over, and independence was assured.

Washington had one more crisis to face, however, before he could retire from his command. Negotiation of the definitive peace treaty took more than a year, and in the interim the British continued to occupy New York City. Washington and the army were encamped upriver at Newburgh. The officers and men were restless, anxious to collect their back pay and return to their homes. During the winter of 1782-1783 some congressmen began to flirt with stirring up discontent among the officers to force the adoption of amendments to the Articles of Confederation--which had been ratified in 1781--so as to provide Congress with a taxing power.

The agitation got out of hand, and a mutinous meeting was called. Washington attended, presided, and by a stirring and dramatic appeal to their love of country, persuaded the officers to disband. Some back pay was arranged for them, and Washington granted furloughs to many. Thus the revolutionary army dissolved. Subsequently, Washington resigned and in a farewell address announced that he would never again enter public life.

The act of laying down his arms astonished the Western world and won him even greater admiration than his generalship had earned him. Europeans and Americans alike, steeped in the history of military usurpations from Caesar to Cromwell, could scarcely believe that a victorious general would voluntarily surrender his command. As [Thomas Jefferson](#) said, "The moderation and virtue of one man probably prevented this Revolution from being closed by a subversion of the liberty it was intended to establish." In America, Washington was hailed as the Father of His Country; in Europe he was heralded as the greatest man of the age.

A Brief Retirement from Public Life

Retirement, after a brief readjustment period marked by depression and restlessness, ushered in a joyful period in his life. He busied himself by tending to his farming; Mount Vernon now extended ten miles along the Potomac and as many as four miles wide and consisted of five separate farm operations. In fact Washington needed to work his holdings intensively to overcome the sizable indebtedness he had accumulated during the Revolution. He entertained an endless procession of guests. He plunged enthusiastically into promoting a scheme long dear to his heart, the construction of a canal connecting the Potomac with the interior waterways that flowed from the Ohio-Mississippi system.

As for his country, Washington declared, in a circular letter he wrote to the state governors in 1783, that Americans were on "political probation; this is the moment when the eyes of the whole World are turned upon them; this is the moment to establish or ruin their national Character forever." What they did now would determine "whether the Revolution must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse: a blessing or a curse, not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn Millions be involved." Specifically he called for strengthening the union, ratifying amendments to the Articles of Confederation that would vest Congress with a taxing power adequate to pay its obligations to the army and other public creditors, and giving Congress powers "to regulate and govern the general concerns of the Confederated Republic." Otherwise, he prophesied, "we may find by our own unhappy experience, that there is a natural and necessary progression, from the extreme of anarchy to the extreme of Tyranny; and that arbitrary power is most easily established on the ruins of Liberty abused to licentiousness."

Liberty abused to licentiousness was less than four years in coming--at least that is the way Washington and like-minded nationalists perceived the disturbances in Massachusetts known as Shays's Rebellion (see [Daniel Shays](#)). Precisely what underlay the insurrection is still disputed by historians, but Superintendent of War Henry Knox wrote Washington that the rebels had 12,000 to 15,000 armed and disciplined troops whose intention was nothing less than a

redistribution of all property. Washington spread that report far and wide. To compound the alarm, the revenue amendments to the Articles of Confederation were unequivocally rejected. Congress and the several state legislatures reacted by calling for a general convention to meet in Philadelphia to revise the Articles.

A Reluctant First President of the United States

The convention materialized in May 1787 and wrote the Constitution; Washington attended and presided over it. His role in working out the details of the Constitution was minimal, but Washington was important to the success of the convention withal. His very attendance, together with [Benjamin Franklin](#)'s, ensured the convention respectability and public trust, which in turn made acceptable proceeding in secret (without which nothing could have been accomplished). His presence in the president's chair ensured decorous and tempered behavior by the other delegates, several of whom had outsized egos and short tempers. Perhaps most important, Washington made it possible to create an executive branch--without which no national government could have been viable--despite the general fear of executive power that had prevailed in America since 1776. Finally, Washington's signature on the Constitution, in the opinion of many observers, made the difference between ratification by the requisite number of states and refusal to ratify.

Following the procedures specified by the newly ratified document, the electoral college chose Washington as the first president, the vote unanimous. He agreed to serve, but reluctantly. He insisted that he had no "wish beyond that of living and dying an honest man on my own farm," felt honor-bound not to break his pledge never again to hold public office, and genuinely doubted his capacity to fulfill the duties of the office. "I cannot pretend," he wrote to a former aide, "to be so well acquainted with civil matters, as I was with military affairs." To another correspondent he added, "my Countrymen will expect too much from me."

During his first few months in office, Washington devoted himself mainly to ceremonial concerns, intuitively realizing that ceremonial activity inhered in the presidency and was crucial to it. Everything he did was likely to set a precedent, and thus he was apt to agonize and consult a great deal before acting. He was already regarded by most Americans as the symbol of the nation; his task was to transfer that symbol to the office of the president itself. The rules and protocols he set were aimed at striking a balance between "too free an intercourse and too much familiarity" with the public and with other officials, which would undermine the dignity of the office, and "an ostentatious show" of monarchical aloofness, which would be improper in a republic. In one respect he was rebuffed: he proposed to serve without compensation, as he had during the Revolution, but Congress voted him a \$25,000 annual salary and successfully insisted that the Constitution expressly required him to receive it.

Creation of a National Government

His early concern with the ritualistic, ceremonial, and symbolic was appropriate for the additional reason that until Congress had time to legislate, there were no laws to be executed, no executive departments to administer them, and no courts to adjudicate them. Washington had thought of taking an active part in the initiation of a legislative agenda but instead decided to leave that to members of Congress, possibly because one of his closest advisers, fellow Virginian [James Madison](#), quickly emerged as the principal leader in the House of Representatives. Largely at Madison's instigation Congress sent the Bill of Rights to the states for ratification and passed a revenue measure and various acts establishing the judiciary and the executive departments before adjourning in September 1789.

As a result of this legislation, Washington faced the task of filling almost a thousand offices. For the most important positions he had already made his choices: [John Jay](#) for chief justice, Thomas Jefferson to head the State Department, Alexander Hamilton at Treasury, Henry Knox at War, [Edmund Randolph](#) as attorney general, and [Samuel Osgood](#) as postmaster general. Finding suitable appointees for the other positions kept Washington busy for months, though he did make time for a tour through New England and a vacation at Mount Vernon. He declined to use the jobs to develop a patronage system, and his appointments were nonpartisan except in the sense that known enemies of the Constitution were unacceptable. No job seeker received an appointment unless Washington knew him personally or his character was endorsed by someone Washington trusted, yet the president's acquaintance with leading citizens was so wide that he was able to fill the offices with competent and honest people in short order.

One weakness appeared in Washington's administrative arrangements. He was accustomed, as a general, to having lengthy consultations with his officers, and the Constitution provided no council of advisers, only that he could require the opinions of the department heads in writing. For a time he did require written opinions, but in addition to imposing an onerous burden of paperwork, it was not as satisfactory as the give-and-take of general discussions. After trying other possibilities, including the seeking of opinions from the Supreme Court, Washington began late in 1791 to hold what came to be called cabinet meetings.

But a discordant note had arisen in the administration by the time cabinet meetings began to be held. In 1790 Congress had enacted Hamilton's complex plan for servicing the revolutionary war debts, and public credit was almost instantaneously established; Washington, remembering his sufferings as commander in the absence of public credit, thought of Hamilton as a miracle worker. But when Congress enacted the second phase of Hamilton's program, the chartering of a national bank, Washington was barraged by charges from Madison, Randolph, and Jefferson that the legislation was unconstitutional. After weighing the arguments, set forth in the celebrated defenses of "loose construction" (by Hamilton) and "strict construction" (by Jefferson), Washington signed the bill into law. Jefferson, however, was unreconciled, and he convinced himself that Hamilton's design was to establish monarchy in America. He tried to convince Washington, and that failing, he and Madison set out to organize an opposition political party. Washington was soon being blasted by a newspaper they founded, and rancor began to mark the administration's councils.

Washington had hoped and planned to retire after one term, but the emergence of domestic disharmony, combined with the outbreak of the French revolutionary wars, made it seem unsafe

to do so, lest his efforts to create a nation be imperiled. Washington accordingly decided that he must stay for a second term. Once again he was the unanimous choice of the electoral college.

Second Term as President

Entanglement in the European wars began to threaten shortly after his second inauguration. First came the mission of Citizen [Edmond Genet](#), who in the interests of his French masters sought aid while simultaneously sowing opposition to the administration, seeking its help, and compromising America's neutrality. Washington issued a neutrality proclamation (which Jefferson argued against), but Genet took his case over Washington's head to the American people. Discredited by his excesses and his country discredited by the execution of Louis XVI and the Reign of Terror, Genet lost his influence even before being recalled (he was condemned to be executed in Paris, but Washington generously granted him asylum). But Genet left a disturbing legacy: about forty "democratic-republican societies," radical political clubs that vehemently opposed the administration and sometimes crossed the boundary between opposition and sedition.

Washington, for his part, tended to regard all opposition as sedition, the concept of a "loyal opposition" having not yet emerged. Moreover, though supporters of the administration calling themselves Federalists had formed something of a party organization, he never became a party man. From the beginning Washington had sought harmony in purpose and unity in support of the government. Toward those ends, in his first annual message to Congress (and in his eighth), he called for the creation of a national university. "The assimilation of the principles, opinions, and manners of our countrymen by the common education of a portion of our youth from every quarter well deserves attention," he said. "The more homogeneous our citizens can be made, the greater will be our prospect of permanent union." Recognizing the crucial role of education in a republic, he repeatedly proposed a course of study that would include "the science of *government*," whereby future leaders would "get fixed in the principles of the Constitution, understand the laws and the true interests and policy of their country." Study would free students from different regions of "those local prejudices and habitual jealousies which, when carried to excess, are never failing sources of disquietude." Congress never acted on his many calls for a national university, and during his second term factionalism and the spirit of party became all-consuming.

The French trouble had no sooner passed than a crisis arose with Britain. A number of sore spots had festered in Anglo-American relations for years, and during the winter of 1793-1794, Britain almost caused renewed hostilities by seizing about 600 American ships for alleged violations of the neutral carrying trade. A clamor for war swept America, and Washington approved preparatory legislation, but he realized that war with Britain could destroy the nation's finances and bring down the new government, so he sent Chief Justice Jay as a special minister to England to negotiate a settlement.

Jay's Treaty (1795)

While Jay was negotiating in London, two episodes occurred that would affect the reception of the treaty he brought home. One was the Whiskey Rebellion, an insurrection in western Pennsylvania against the federal excise tax on liquor. Following procedures specified in the Militia Act, Washington obtained certification from a federal judge that the laws were being opposed by "combinations too powerful to be suppressed" by ordinary judicial proceedings. He issued a proclamation ordering the insurgents to return to their homes and, that failing, called for the mobilization of 12,900 militia from four states. Washington himself led the troops for three weeks before turning command over to [Henry Lee](#). No shots were fired, but two thousand rebels fled the area. Twenty were tried for treason, two were convicted. Washington pardoned them both. His formula for coping with widespread resistance to the law was a wise one: massive suppression followed by magnanimous forgiveness. He also made political capital of it all. When he reported the insurrection to Congress, he placed a large share of the blame on the democratic-republican societies, thereby discrediting and all but destroying them as engines of opposition.

The other episode took place farther west. Indians and white settlers in the Northwest Territory had been in a state of conflict for some years. Recently the Indians had been incited and armed by the British, who, to the outrage of the administration, had retained military posts in the area. Earlier American expeditions in 1790 and 1791 had failed, but now Washington sent a force under [Anthony Wayne](#), who in 1794 crushed the Indians at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. The British did not help the Indians as they had promised, and when their alliance fell apart the British had no alternative but to abandon their posts. Therefore, when Jay's Treaty was presented to Congress, one feature of the treaty--specifically calling for the removal of the British from the Northwest posts--was no longer a concession that would win friends for ratification; Wayne had already achieved the removal.

The treaty became the subject of a heated political controversy. It was not unflawed, but it preserved the peace, granted some commercial concessions, and pioneered the use of arbitration commissions to settle international disputes. In addition, Britain unilaterally canceled the orders under which the seizures of American ships had been justified. Nonetheless, Republican party members organized protest rallies and petition drives against ratification. They had not actually seen the treaty, for its terms were kept secret until after consideration by the Senate, but they had opposed any amicable agreement with Britain and hoped to turn defeat of the treaty to political advantage. Despite Republican efforts, during the summer of 1795 the Senate ratified the treaty by the narrowest of constitutional margins, twenty votes to ten. The extent of the opposition, however, caused Washington to hesitate to sign the treaty, and Randolph (who had succeeded Jefferson as secretary of state) urged him not to sign. Then intercepted documents seemed to indicate that Randolph had sought French bribes to influence American policy. When they were shown to Washington he flew into a rage and reacted by signing the treaty.

The matter did not end there. In March 1796 the House passed a resolution, authored by Republican [Edward Livingston](#) of New York, requesting that the president provide the House with all papers relevant to the treaty. The Republicans' motivation was political, but an important

constitutional question was also at stake, namely whether the House had a right to see the papers because the treaty would involve appropriations, which could be initiated only in the House. A still deeper issue was how much information the executive could withhold from Congress or the public in the interest of national security. Washington's position was unequivocal: a thundering refusal. He said that the papers were not "relative to any purpose under the cognizance of the House of Representatives, except that of an impeachment, which the resolution has not expressed." He observed that the House had been implementing treaties for seven years without asserting a right to a larger role. Washington then went on to lecture Congress on the executive and foreign affairs. The conduct of foreign relations, he said, occasionally required secrecy, and though that could be dangerous, the Constitution reduced the danger by making the Senate, not the House, privy to these matters. After a month of sometimes angry debate, the House voted the funds without seeing the requested papers.

Another major treaty negotiated by the Washington administration met a more favorable reception. Spain, which regarded the westward expansion of the United States as a threat to its empire in America, had effectively closed the Mississippi River to navigation by refusing Americans the right of deposit for transshipment in New Orleans. In 1795 Washington sent [Thomas Pinckney](#) to Madrid to seek the right of deposit, and Pinckney succeeded. That meant that westerners had an outlet to the sea at last, as Washington had sought in his ill-fated Potomac canal project. And thus, appropriately, Washington's public life closed as it had begun, with an eye to opening the West as a vast empire of liberty.

In the fall of 1796 Washington announced his decision to retire at the end of his second term. It seemed safe to do so, for no threat of war appeared, and he could take comfort from knowing that he was leaving the government and the presidency on firm foundations. But retirement was also something he ardently desired, for the cost of service had been high. For more than three years he had been forced to endure calumnies that grew steadily in viciousness and intensity. He had retained his poise in public, but privately, as Jefferson later recalled, he suffered "more than any person I ever yet met with."

Washington's Legacy as "Father of His Country"

His farewell address reflected this suffering when he warned his fellow citizens "against the baneful effects" of the party spirit. It "agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms," creates animosities, and foments "riots and insurrection." In a republican government, indeed in any free government, there was a "constant danger of excess" that must be restrained by the constitutional system of checks and balances and also by "Religion and Morality," the "firmest foundations of the duties of men and citizens." Otherwise, his advice to the nation was to "cherish public credit" and use it "as sparingly as possible" and to "observe good faith and justice toward all nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all," avoid "excessive partiality" or "excessive dislike" toward any, and "have as little political connection with them as possible."

Except for an agreement to serve as commander in chief if a war with France should materialize--it did not--Washington had ended his public career. One urgent private matter concerned him deeply. He had long since determined to free his slaves, and he did so in a will drawn during the last year of his life. He was the only Virginia founder to free his slaves, and he made provisions for supporting the young until they reached maturity and the old and infirm for the duration of their lives. The last pension payment from his estate was made in 1833.

In December 1799 Washington contracted some kind of throat infection and died at Mount Vernon after a brief illness. He was survived by his widow--they had no children, and his two stepchildren were long since deceased--and by a grieving but grateful nation. Jefferson bespoke the common attitude when he wrote, "His was the singular destiny and merit of leading the armies of his country successfully through an arduous war for the establishment of its independence, of conducting its councils through the birth of a government, new in its forms and principles, until it settled down into a quiet and orderly train; and of scrupulously obeying the laws through the whole of his career, civil and military, of which the history of the world furnishes no other example." And as Henry Lee said in his celebrated eulogy before Congress, Washington had been "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

Bibliography

The birth date listed at the beginning of this entry warrants explanation. At the time of Washington's birth, the Old Style, or Julian, calendar was in effect, making his birth date 11 February 1731. Twenty years later, Britain and the colonies adopted the New Style, or Gregorian, calendar, which entailed a forward shift in dates by eleven days; hence the traditional date for Washington's birthday: 22 February 1732. Because the Julian calendar marked the new year on 25 March rather than 1 January, it may seem that the Old Style and New Style versions of Washington's birth date are a year apart. In order to forestall that mistaken impression, the Old Style day and month are given with the New Style year.

The papers of Washington, consisting of diaries, letters written to and by him, financial accounts, and other documents, are housed mainly in the Library of Congress. They are available on twenty-four reels of microfilm, with a printed index, in *Presidential Papers Microfilm: George Washington Papers* (1965). Many are now available online from the Library of Congress at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html>. His own principal writings are contained in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *George Washington's Diaries* (4 vols., 1925) and *The Writings of George Washington* (39 vols., 1931-1944). The definitive multivolume edition is W. W. Abbott, ed., *The Papers of George Washington* (1983-). An excellent one-volume selection of his writings is W. B. Allen, ed., *George Washington: A Collection* (1988).

The first biography of the first president is the largely fictional work by Parson Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of George Washington, with Curious Anecdotes Equally Honorable to Himself and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen* (1800). The first serious and sound study is John

Marshall, *The Life of George Washington* (5 vols., 1804-1807); the next is Henry Cabot Lodge, *George Washington* (2 vols., 1889); followed by Paul Leicester Ford, *The True George Washington* (1898); Rupert Hughes, *George Washington* (3 vols., 1926-1930); and John C. Fitzpatrick, *George Washington Himself* (1933). All these works are extremely favorable. The first of a debunking sort, on which other writers of potboilers still draw, is W. E. Woodward, *George Washington: The Image and the Man* (1926), which depicts him as venal, fraudulent, crooked, and stupid. The more or less definitive study is Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography* (7 vols., 1948-1957). Less knowledgeable but more readable is James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington* (4 vols., 1965-1972). A more recent biography is John E. Ferling, *The First of Men: A Life of George Washington* (1988).

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