George Washington: A Man for Our Time—and All Times

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Ronald Reagan was once asked whether he had learned anything as an actor that had been useful to him as a president. “There have been times in this office,” Reagan responded, “when I wondered how you could do the job if you hadn’t been an actor.”

George Washington would have agreed. He loved the theater and attended regularly. His friends said he would have gone every night if he could have.

His favorite play was one of the staples of the 18th century stage—Joseph Addison’s *Cato*, which pitted the last defenders of the Roman republic against the forces of Julius Caesar and the nascent Roman empire.

The play’s central theme is the duties of citizenship—specifically, what it means (and costs) to put the needs of one’s country ahead of personal considerations.

To us, today, these can demands appear extreme, almost inhuman. When Cato, the leader of the republican forces, receives the news that his son has been killed in battle, he asks only whether his son acquitted himself honorably. He refuses to express the private grief he might have felt.

In one of the play’s turning points, some of Cato’s troops munity, and in a dramatic confrontation, he alternatively threatens and shames them into reversing course. This scene evidently exercised a powerful influence on Washington’s imagination as he faced a comparable challenge. Here, in brief, is the story.

Toward the end of the Revolutionary War, many of Washington’s veterans feared that they might not get what the Continental Congress had promised when they enlisted. As the months before the formal conclusion of the war dragged on, they grew increasingly impatient—and then angry.

In March of 1783, a group of disgruntled officers sought to convene a meeting in Newburgh, New York to consider a direct challenge to the Congress’s authority. Washington opposed this proposal and called for a four-day delay to give his solders’ passions a chance to cool. When the officers gathered, Washington, who had implied that he would not attend, made a dramatic entrance into the hall and asked for an opportunity to address them. He then made a speech that drew heavily on the themes that Cato had used in Addison’s play.

The influence of the theater on Washington did not end there. Toward the end of his speech, Washington tried to read a supportive letter he had received. After squinting at it and stumbling through the first sentence, he paused, reached into his coat pocket, and drew out a pair of spectacles he had recent acquired. As he was putting them on, he remarked, “Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have gone grey in your service and now find myself growing blind.” At this theatrical gesture, any of the officers began openly weeping. Washington finished reading the letter, then folded it and made a dramatic exit from the hall although the meeting was still underway, implying (as one scholar has suggested) that any further defense of the call to mutiny was unthinkable.

And so it proved. The meeting quickly disbanded, but not before passing a motion of thanks for Washington's intervention. Transmitting to Congress a few days later a peaceful petition for the redress of his soldiers' grievances a few days, he went out of his way to praise their patriotism. Through his eloquence and theatrical sense, Washington had single-handedly quelled had dispelled a military revolt that could have strangled America's constitutional government in its cradle.

Washington's ability to lead rested on skill, but even more on character. Indeed, his entire life is proof that character matters in public as well as private life. Washington was a passionate man, but he learned to govern his passions. He did not lack ambition, but for him, virtue and honor were more important than power.

When an American visitor informed King George III of Washington's intention to resign his commission after the war ended, the king remarked that, "If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world." And this is what Washington did. Consciously imitating the Roman hero Cincinnatus, he returned to his farm after leading his army to victory. After two arduous terms as president, his friends pleaded with him to continue in office, arguing (correctly, as it turned out) that if he left office, contention between the forces arrayed around John Adams and Thomas Jefferson could split the country and threaten the constitution. He refused and returned to his farm a final time, dying just two years later.

Washington's leadership conveys a lesson painfully relevant to our own time: Without good character, even the best designed institutions will not function well and may break down altogether. Even James Madison, who famously argued that well-designed institutions could limit the dangers of clashing interests and passions, conceded that constitutional republics needed civic virtue more than any other form of government. If we care about the perpetuation of constitutional democracy, we must pay more attention to the ways in which this virtue can be nurtured.

Washington also teaches us valuable lessons in the art of governance. He picked the most talented advisors he could find—Jefferson, Madison, and Alexander Hamilton, for example—even if they disagreed among themselves. Although most of his advisors were better educated than he was and more knowledgeable about the details of public policy, he was confident that he could use their skills—and their disagreements—to frame wise responses to public problems.

As Washington's contemporaries attested, his method of making decisions reflected this confidence. He invariably began by soliciting a wide range of views in writing He worked hard to understand the best arguments on all sides, often asking one advisor to respond to another's views. He deliberated carefully, which often meant more slowly than his impatient aides preferred. But once he made his decision, he executed it unswervingly, whatever the difficulties he encountered along the way. To maximize the chances of success, he insisted that all his subordinates speak with one voice in support of his decisions, whatever position they had taken before the decision was made. His record of accomplishment as president attests to the wisdom of these practices.

Washington's successful leadership rested, as well, on less tangible factors. He was able to distance himself from personal attachments to reflect calmly on the matters before him. He had a sense of what a specific occasion required, in tone and substance, and what the central task of the moment might be. He was always aware of the broader effects of his actions and

decisions; he knew that he was setting precedents that would shape the institution of the presidency.

Washington was graced with intellectual virtues that cannot be taught, good judgment and foresight chief among them. Two examples will suffice. When he began reading the *Federalist* papers, he saw immediately that although they were written for an immediate practical purpose—securing the ratification of the Constitution—they would have an enduring influence on our understanding of constitutional institutions. And when the Marquis de Lafayette wrote him optimistic letters during the early days of the French revolution, he wrote back to warn his friend that initial moderation could give way to extremism that would prove hard to control.

I move, finally, from Washington's leadership and character to his principles. Despite the claims of some contemporary conservatives to the contrary, Washington was an defender of the Enlightenment—and of the central role of reasons and science in public affairs. And he was committed to the essentials of what we now call liberal democracy. Despite his aristocratic inclinations, he insisted that all legitimate authority rested on the consent of the governed. Despite his annoyance about unfriendly coverage in the opposition press of his times, he staunchly defended the freedom of the press. And perhaps most important, he championed religious liberty against its many skeptics.

I close with a story that exemplifies not only Washington's commitment to freedom of religion but also the enduring influence of Portugal on American society. After Rhode Island finally ratified the Constitution in 1790, Washington decided to reward the laggard with a visit. Moses Seixas, the leader of a community of Jews of Portuguese descent in Newport, Rhode Island, wrote a letter to Washington welcoming him to the state and praising his leadership. Washington responded with a letter that became a classic statement of religious liberty. He promised the Touro synagogue more than mere religious tolerance, asserting that "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights." The United States did not demand—or need—religious conformity, Washington explained. "The Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support."

Washington closed with an allusion to the prophet Micah that proved prophetic in America: "May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid."

I hope that I will give no offense when I observe that Portugal's loss after 1496 was Washington's gain three centuries later, and the world's gain thereafter.

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