

## LESSON SEVEN

# George Washington: America's First President

June 15, 2022

Key Themes: Leadership; defining the role of the president; service to the American people

ACI Values: Faith, Liberty

Have you ever had to make a difficult decision? Has it ever been hard for you to do the right thing? Have you ever been called upon to do something that seemed hard for you to do?

It can be frightening to do something that you know is right. For instance, standing up for a friend can be difficult when others are bullying them. It can be difficult to wait your turn, share the last cookie in the box with a friend, or let your younger sibling choose which movie to watch on family movie night. But you make the sacrifice for others because you care about them.

It's sometimes hard to do the right thing. It can be difficult to find the bravery and the strength to go against the tide. But being able to do so is an important part of being a leader.

George Washington was one such figure in our nation's history, who was called upon to do the seemingly impossible by his fellow Americans. Washington faced many such challenges throughout his life, and there were many times that he shouldn't have survived – in a battle while serving in the Virginia Regiment, before becoming the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, he had two horses shot out from under him and four bullet holes in his coat.<sup>1</sup>

However, Washington's faith in God and his ability to endure and persevere allowed him to overcome any obstacle that stood in his path. His decisive leadership set an example for generals and presidents alike to follow in the decades following the founding of the United States.

America's first president was a strong man in many ways. Washington had a tall and imposing figure, commanding the respect of all who saw him. But it wasn't just his appearance that mattered, for a leader is only as strong as the integrity of his spirit, and Washington was morally strong as well. He saw himself as a man of honor and virtue and tried to live his life by doing the right thing. Washington was bold and brave, and he inspired others around him to do great things as well. A

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/resume/>

sense of dignity surrounded him, one which commanded respect from all the other Founding Fathers.<sup>2</sup>

When Washington was 17, he got a job as a surveyor of Virginia and the Western frontier, a profession that exposed him to the vastness and beauty of America. His experience as a surveyor taught him a lot about America's terrain, which would help in his pursuit of a career as a soldier. He learned where the creeks, caves, and forests were, and became an expert in reading the weather. Later in his military service, he used this knowledge to leverage the landscape as a tool in the fight for America's independence.

In 1754, Washington earned a commission as a major in the Virginia Militia, working alongside the British, who were in a dispute with the French over territory in the Ohio Valley, which the French refused to vacate. Washington and his men ambushed a French scouting party while in the Ohio Valley, which resulted in the outbreak of the French and Indian War.<sup>3</sup>

As an inexperienced fighter, Washington learned he bit off more than he could chew and that there are times to fight, and times to not engage. But as he fought in the French and Indian War, he learned about British military tactics and that what was useful in Europe was not necessarily efficient in the colonies.

We all make mistakes, but Washington was very careful to learn from the ones that he and others made. As one historian wrote of Washington, he made many mistakes, but it is hard to find a mistake he made twice. He was a good leader because he was able to learn from his failures to keep them from happening again in the future. What Washington learned would later come in handy as he led the Continental Army in their fight for independence.

Though Washington contributed greatly to the war with the French and England's Indian allies, he was disappointed that he didn't receive a royal commission, which meant that his days as a soldier might be over.<sup>4</sup>

But years later, he would again be called upon to fight a war in 1775. But this time, it was to be against the same British Army he fought for during the French and Indian War.

Following the battles at Lexington and Concord, the Second Continental Congress sought a general to lead the newly formed Continental Army. Congress asked Washington, and he humbly agreed to lead America's soldiers into battle. Accepting this commission from the Continental Congress, he began to slowly build an army.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gingrich360.com/2021/01/01/newts-world-ep-179-the-immortals-george-washington/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gingrich360.com/product/the-first-american/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/george-washington-french-indian-war-jumonville>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gingrich360.com/product/the-first-american/>

When George Washington agreed to lead the Continental Army, victory for the colonists was not guaranteed. General Washington knew that there was a good chance they might fail, but he was willing to risk everything and dedicate his life to the cause of American independence and freedom.

During the darkest days of the American Revolution, Washington's faith and unwavering spirit enabled him to lead his men to victory. He always believed that God had a divine plan for both himself and the Revolution. Despite numerous setbacks, General Washington's military achievements and his ability to inspire and rally Americans to join the cause for independence were nothing short of a miracle.

He liberated the city of Boston from British occupation during the early days of the war and crossed the Delaware River to win a much-needed victory against the Hessians mercenaries employed by the British Crown on December 26, 1776, the very day after Christmas!

At Valley Forge in the winter of 1777 to 1778, he transformed an army of poorly trained militiamen, who were discouraged, starving, and freezing, into a formidable fighting force. With the help of Baron von Steuben, the ragtag Continental Army had been made capable of directly confronting the greatest military in all the world.<sup>6</sup>

After many more years of fighting, the battle at Yorktown led to the defeat of British General Charles Cornwallis in October of 1781. His surrender all but ended the American Revolution and secured the independence of the thirteen colonies.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of his victories, Washington was highly popular for his military contributions to the American Revolution. Upon the conclusion of the war and the gaining of American independence, many even called upon Washington to declare himself a king! But, to the surprise of many, he refused.

Instead, on December 23, 1783, Washington resigned his command of the army and went home to Mount Vernon. Following the conclusion of the war and recognition of American independence, he no longer saw the need to serve as commander-in-chief of the army.<sup>8</sup> In resigning as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, he had established the precedent of military subservience to the civilian government of the United States. In other words, the army would have to answer to the Congress which answers to the people, rather than the other way around.

Some Americans were confused. Why had Washington, at the height of his popularity, chosen to give up his power? Who wouldn't want to be a king if given the opportunity? But others saw that he had retired in the same spirit of an ancient Roman general, Cincinnatus. Although Cincinnatus could

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/valley-forge/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/yorktown-campaign/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/george-washington-resigns-as-commander-in-chief>

have become a dictator, this wildly popular figure instead chose to retire to his farm for the good of the Roman Republic. In this same tradition, Washington had decided to relinquish his power for the good of this new American Republic.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, try as he may, Washington could not escape his almost universal popularity! For his decision to resign from this position with such honor and dignity had only led to its increase. Once again, his humility had only made him more worthy for the very job for which he thought himself to be unworthy – to be the first caretaker and leader of the newly independent America.

When Washington was selected to be a delegate at the Constitutional Convention he initially declined the opportunity. But then, after others pressured him to go, he agreed and was unanimously selected to preside over the convention in 1787. Washington's role at the convention was very important. He created an orderly environment that allowed arguing delegates to agree to compromises, which eventually would create the U.S. Constitution.

Following the ratification of the United States Constitution, he was so beloved by the American people that he was called upon to run for the presidency of the United States.

Washington didn't want to be president. He wanted to return to his quiet life at Mount Vernon. But finally, he consented. In 1789, the Electoral College unanimously elected George Washington to serve as the first president of the United States.

Washington understood above all else that his actions as President of the United States would have long-lasting consequences. He deeply believed in precedent, or that every action he undertook would affect how future American presidents and leaders would conduct themselves for generations to come.

As our country's first president, Washington would again seek to establish precedents that would define the American presidency for all time.

The eight years that followed were therefore dedicated to establishing many of the presidency's powers and characteristics. Refusing to be addressed in the style of European monarchs, Washington insisted that he instead be addressed as "Mister President." He established the first cabinet, created the U.S. Navy, nominated the first Supreme Court Justice, established the dollar as America's official currency, and supported the Bill of Rights (which was ratified during his presidency).

The decisions that Washington made throughout his presidency were always made with the future of the American people in mind. He weighed everything that he did through the lens of considering how those who supported him would look to his example and led with fairness, prudence, and

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/cincinnatus/>

integrity. He refused to formally align with a political party during his tenure as president, being staunchly opposed to the idea of dividing the people of the United States along partisan lines.<sup>10</sup>

In everything that he did, Washington sought to unify the country into a single entity rather than an alliance of states. As we've discussed, the weakness of the central government under the Articles of Confederation had proved to be a failure; Washington's job therefore was to make the Constitution, which created a stronger central government and enshrined the rights and freedoms of the people, work for Americans.

Washington retired from the presidency in March of 1797. Following the end of his second term, he refused to entertain any further notions of holding the position for any longer. Once again, he sought to set a precedent that United States presidents do not hold onto power forever. This compelled even King George III to call him "the greatest character of the age" for again giving up his power so selflessly.<sup>11</sup>

In his 1796 Farewell Address, he warned against partisan and regional division, as well as foreign influence and corruption. For Washington, preserving the union, independence, and freedom that Americans sacrificed for and won together was most important.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/political-parties/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.heritage.org/commentary/the-man-who-would-not-be-king>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/george-washington-farewell-address-warnings>