



George Washington and His Importance to American History

The Indispensable American

George Washington is arguably America's most important historical figure. We carry his picture in our wallets on the one-dollar bill and his profile on our quarter-dollar coins. We named our capital city and its most prominent memorial after him. The state of Washington, as well as countless cities, counties, streets, schools and public places, preserves his memory. He is revered as a symbol of our country's beginnings and remains one of the most famous Americans who ever lived.

His importance to American history can be stated quite simply: without George Washington, we might never have had an American history as we know it.

Holding an Army—and a Revolution—Together

As commander of the Continental Army, Washington left his stamp of leadership and endurance during the darkest days of our revolutionary struggle. He brought a starving, ill-equipped Continental Army through the bleak winter at Valley Forge in 1777–78, and with the assistance of Baron Friedrich von Steuben transformed his soldiers into a more disciplined and effective fighting force.

Washington's performance as a military commander was more stoic and steady than spectacular. He understood that merely keeping the Continental Army intact was essential. He generally avoided risking his entire army in a decisive engagement against superior British forces when defeat might destroy the Revolution along with it.

Washington lost battles, sometimes badly, but he refused to lose his army. He endured setbacks, shortages, desertions and political criticism while maintaining enough of a military force to keep the Revolution alive.

Victory at Yorktown

Eventually, French military and naval assistance tipped the balance. In 1781, instead of attacking the British stronghold at New York, Washington and the French commander, the Comte de Rochambeau, marched their armies south toward Virginia. There, with the French fleet preventing a British escape by sea, the combined American and French forces trapped Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown.

The British surrender at Yorktown effectively ended major combat in the Revolution. Washington had accomplished what sometimes seemed impossible: he had kept an army—and a revolution—alive long enough to win.

Washington the Unifier

Washington returned to life as a gentleman farmer at Mount Vernon, but retirement did not last. In 1787 he came out of retirement to preside over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Once again, in a time of uncertainty and disagreement, Washington served as the unifying figure admired across political and regional divisions.

When the convention produced a Constitution establishing three branches of government, Washington was the logical choice to become the country's first chief executive. In 1789, the Electoral College unanimously selected him as the first president of the United States.

Inventing the Presidency

George Washington lent his enormous personal prestige to a presidency for which there was no American precedent. Almost everything he did helped define the office for those who followed him.

Preferring moderation and attempting to remain above the political infighting among such advisers as Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, Washington helped establish the presidency as an office representing the nation as a whole. Just as importantly, after two terms he voluntarily relinquished power and returned to private life. That decision helped establish one of the most important traditions of the young republic: political authority was temporary and would be transferred peacefully rather than held for life.

Advice His Children Didn't Always Follow

Washington has been called the Father of His Country, but children rarely follow all of a parent's advice. This was certainly true of the advice Washington left Americans in his Farewell Address.

He warned about the dangers of bitter political factions and cautioned against permanent entanglements with foreign powers. Yet political parties were already developing within his own administration, and the fiercely partisan election of 1800 soon demonstrated just how deeply political divisions could run.

America initially attempted to steer a relatively neutral course between competing European powers. Over the succeeding generations, however, the expanding United States found it increasingly difficult to remain detached from conflicts beyond its shores.

Washington on the National Debt

Another piece of Washington's advice remains strikingly pertinent whenever Americans debate federal spending and debt. In his Farewell Address, he urged the nation to **“cherish public credit”** and recommended using borrowing “as sparingly as possible.” He also reminded Americans of an uncomfortable financial reality: debts eventually require revenue, revenue requires taxes, and taxes inevitably involve some degree of public inconvenience.

Washington was writing for a small agricultural republic at the end of the eighteenth century, not the enormous modern economy and federal government of today. Nevertheless, his underlying point has survived remarkably well: government spending, borrowing and taxation cannot ultimately be separated from one another.

One wonders what Washington would make of our modern arguments over enormous federal spending packages when the taxes required to pay for them are considerably less popular than the spending itself.

First in the Hearts of His Countrymen

George Washington died at Mount Vernon on December 14, 1799, at the age of 67 after a sudden and severe throat illness. His death produced widespread public mourning throughout the young nation.

Perhaps the most memorable tribute came from his fellow Virginian and Revolutionary War veteran **Henry “Light-Horse Harry” Lee**, who delivered words that captured Washington's extraordinary place in the country's history:

“First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.”

More than two centuries later, Washington's importance rests on more than winning a revolution or becoming the first president. At several critical moments—the Revolution, the Constitutional Convention and the establishment of the presidency—the new nation needed someone whose authority transcended competing interests.

Again and again, that person was George Washington.