

THE CHARACTER AND STATESMANSHIP OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

Leadership Lecture by J. David Gowdy
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Students, distinguished faculty, and guests: I am indeed grateful for the invitation to speak to you today, and it is a privilege to meet with you here at Southern Virginia University. This is my first visit to your campus and even though it is winter, its beauty exceeds my expectations. But what is more pleasant is to be in your presence. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "I have stepped out upon this platform that I may see you and that you may see me, and in the arrangement I have the best of the bargain."¹

We gather this morning in a private university of the Commonwealth of Virginia, whose official seal represents *Virtue* conquering *Tyranny* -- a message that remains true today. This symbol seems appropriate for our topic, for if there ever was a virtuous man, I submit that he is Washington, and it was he who led our nation against tyranny in the revolutionary war, defeating the greatest army and navy on the earth.

I was born in 1954 and grew up in Kansas. As a young boy I admired George Washington. Since 1995 I have studied his life and writings along with the other Founding Fathers'. They were good and wise men. I have discovered that the greatness of these men is revealed in the fact that they studied virtue and labored on their own characters as much or more than they labored on the character of the new nation.

So as a fellow student of history, in the time we have together, I would like to briefly focus on three aspects of Washington's life and leadership: First, his Character; Second, his Statesmanship; and Finally, his Farewell Address.

I. The Character of George Washington

George Washington began at an early age to work to improve his character. At age 16 he copied out by hand "The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and in Conversation." These rules of civility, totaling 110, are based upon a set composed by French Jesuits in 1595. Upon review, they may seem outdated and even silly (particularly in our modern Hollywood and Facebook culture, where it sometimes seems that civility and decent behavior are all a thing of the past), but at their core they have to do with good manners, modesty, morality, and respect for others. You might think of them as a guide like the Church's "For the Strength of Youth" pamphlet -- only in the 1700's.

¹ *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* edited by Roy P. Basler, Volume IV, "Remarks at Painesville, Ohio" (February 16, 1861), p. 218.

Here are a few:

6th – “Sleep not when others speak...”

7th – “Put not off your clothes in the presence of others, nor go out your chamber half dress’d.”

9th – “Spit not in the fire...”

15th – “Keep your nails clean and short, also your hands and teeth clean yet without showing any great concern for them.

Now some more serious ones:

22nd – “Show not yourself glad at the misfortune of another though he were your enemy.”

40th – “Strive not with your superiors in argument, but always submit your judgment to others with modesty.”

48th – “Wherein you reprove another be unblameable yourself; for example is more prevalent than precepts.”

82nd – “Undertake not what you cannot perform but be careful to keep your promise.”

89th – “Speak not evil of the absent for it is unjust.”

And finally,

108th – “When you speak of God or his attributes, let it be seriously & with reverence. Honor & obey your natural parents although they be poor.”

109th – “Let your recreations be manful not sinful.”

110th – “Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.”

Of course, we cannot assume that just because young George wrote down these rules (most likely for a schoolmaster), that he followed all of them. But as so many have studied and reviewed his life’s conduct in private as well as in public, it appears that he took this academic exercise most seriously to heart. Parson Weems got this right in his biography of Washington, when he wrote that it was “no wonder every body honoured him who honoured every body.”²

In his moral biography of Washington, Richard Brookhiser asserts that Washington was obsessed with what today we would call his reputation or public image but was then known in the 18th century as "character." From his youth, he sought dignified fame and military glory. He achieved both. But he did so, just as we must do, by learning from his mistakes and through diligence and great self-discipline.

In this vein, as one commentator has written, “Underneath everything lay Washington's desire for a good reputation. Some acts were simply dishonorable, some bad manners, and others merely stupid. A gentleman who wanted respect avoided all three as best he could. The preventives were called honesty and courage, courtesy and civility, and the combination of reading, intelligent observation, and fore-thought. One avoided thoughtless words and promises by saying little, drinking less, and by an unwavering politeness to friends and enemies alike. This was not easy for Washington, for he was a sensitive man who possessed a fiery temper and he had an exquisite vocabulary of unprintable words which could be effectively employed on the proper occasions. All the more reason for his exercising his famous self-control.”³

² Mason L. Weems, *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits of General George Washington* (J.P. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia, 1918), p. 272.

³ Monmouth College Book Review of Richard Brookhiser, *Rediscovering George Washington: Founding Father*, (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996), <http://department.monm.edu/history/urban/reviews/brookhiser.htm>.

Washington's character as a young military officer was tested in the French and Indian War. As Brookhiser writes, this war was "the final struggle between Britain and France for control of the Continent, and Washington took part in some of its most dramatic moments; indeed, he had fired the first shots in it. ...Before the war began, Washington, a major in the militia with training as a surveyor, made a 300-mile trip into the Pennsylvania wilderness to scout out French intentions, keeping a journal... He was only 21 years old. [A year later] he went back into the woods at the head of a small force [as a British officer] where he attacked a party of French. "I heard the bullet's whistle," he wrote a younger brother, "and, believe me, there is something charming in the sound..."

Washington ...[had] expected to drive the French to Montreal; instead, they surrounded him and forced him to surrender. Britain's agent for Indian affairs felt the young officer had been "too ambitious of acquiring all the honour," and hence overly impetuous." [Some even felt he was responsible for the war that proceeded from that initial conflict]. But, the colonial consensus was that Washington had been outnumbered by enemies who had been up to no good."

"[Later] In 1755, Washington witnessed a far greater defeat, when an army led by British General Edward Braddock was cut to pieces outside Fort Duquesne, now Pittsburgh. Washington, who was serving as Braddock's aide, had two horses shot out from under him, led a remnant of men to safety, and buried his slain commander. ...Washington spent three more years commanding the Virginia militia on the frontier, angling for a better assignment and seeking to maintain the discipline of his troops."⁴

So, it seems on the one hand that during the French and Indian Washington failed to observe the very rules of civility that had assisted him in his social and military rise. On author writes, "There is something unlikable about the George Washington of [this period]. He seems a trifle raw ...too ready to complain, too nakedly concerned with promotion."⁵ But on the other hand, Washington grew in stature because he faced his failures, and in turn recognized and persisted in overcoming his own errors. And, there was no question that he was exceedingly brave in the face of danger and incredibly tough in battle.

Through time, occupied by diligent study, self-reflection and self-discipline Washington managed to bridle his temper and his ambition for personal fame and to place the interests of his countrymen above self.

Also important to remember, is his courtship and marriage to Martha Dandridge Custis. She was not only a beautiful, but a very wealthy widow of Virginia. Martha fell in love and George found her quite attractive. (That she had a good disposition and inherited wealth were an added bonus to the relationship). He had had a crush on a pretty neighbor, Sally Fairfax, but when she married another, he knew he must find a suitable wife for himself.

Martha married George on January 6, 1759. The marriage changed George from being a comfortably well-off, country gentleman-soldier to becoming one of Virginia's wealthiest landowners. He had resigned his commission in the militia and so, George, Martha, and her two children, Jacky (age 4), and Patsy (age 2), moved into the enlarged and remodeled Mt. Vernon. Her influence on Washington was lasting.

⁴ Richard Brookhiser, *Rediscovering George Washington: Founding Father*, (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996), pp. 22-23 (cited as *Brookhiser*).

⁵ *Id.* Guthrie, citing Marcus Cunliffe, *George Washington: Man and Monument* (Boston, 1958), p. 58.

The next decade thrust Washington into the events that led to America's war for Independence. His civility and modesty was exhibited when he accepted his commission as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army in 1775. He told Congress that if "some unlucky event should happen unfavorable to my reputation, I beg it be remembered by every gentlemen in the room, that this day I declare...that I do not think myself equal to the command I am honored with."⁶

During the Revolutionary War, and after, Washington grew in stature and wisdom. The ultimate growth and development of his character is probably best described by Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the following in a letter fourteen years after Washington's death:

"I think I knew General Washington intimately and thoroughly; and were I called on to delineate his character, it should be in terms like these.

His mind was great and powerful... and as far as he saw, no judgment was ever sounder. ...He was incapable of fear, meeting personal dangers with the calmest unconcern. Perhaps the strongest feature in his character was prudence, never acting until every circumstance, every consideration, was maturely weighed; refraining if he saw a doubt, but, when once decided, going through with his purpose, whatever obstacles opposed.

His integrity was most pure, his justice the most inflexible I have ever known. ...He was, indeed, in every sense of the words, a wise, a good, and a great man. ...His person, you know, was fine, his stature exactly what one would wish, his deportment easy, erect and noble; the best horseman of his age, and the most graceful figure that could be seen on horseback....

On the whole, his character was, in its mass, perfect, in nothing bad, in few points indifferent; and it may truly be said, that never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great...

For 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 [new] government... 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. . . .

We knew his honesty ...

I felt on his death, with my countrymen, that 'verily a great man hath fallen this day in Israel.'⁷

II. The Statesmanship of George Washington

Next let's turn to Washington's Statesmanship. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines a "statesman" as one who is versed in the principles or art of government; and a wise, skillful, and respected political leader. Washington was all of this, and more.

While not as well educated as Jefferson or Madison, Washington (who did not attend college), in addition to a being an ardent student of farming, was a devoted reader and student of Western political philosophy and history. At the time of his death, his library consisted of over 900 volumes, which in addition to agricultural books, included such classics as Plato's *Republic*,

⁶ James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington*, (Boston, 1965-72), vol. I, p. 341 (cited as JTF).

⁷ Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Walter Jones, January 2, 1814, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, (Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, Washington D.C., 1903) (cited as "ME"), 14:48-52.

Aristotle's *Politics*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and Locke's *Two Treatises on Government*. One of his favorite books, however, was not a treatise on agriculture but a play titled *Cato* by Addison. Washington loved the theatre, and like many other new Americans, appreciated the relevance of the play's depiction of the Roman statesman *Cato's* struggle between virtue and tyranny. Of course, he read newspapers and the pamphlets of the Revolution, such as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, of which he ordered copies for all of his troops. And, during the debate over the Constitution, he read the *Federalist Papers*, as well as many other essays.

He also surrounded himself with, and listened to counsel from, the great thinkers of the Revolution: Thomas Jefferson, his first Secretary of State, Alexander Hamilton, his Secretary of the Treasury, and John Adams, the first Vice President. Like President Lincoln's cabinet, these men proved to be Washington's "Team of Rivals." Washington also considered James Madison a trusted political confidant and corresponded with him often. When Washington contemplated his retirement from public office (after his first term as President), he relied on Madison to draft his farewell address.⁸

Finally, Washington's education in the principles of self-government were deeply rooted in religion and in his reading of the Bible. As a prominent historian has stated, "Throughout his public life Washington successfully balanced public religion with religious liberty... [he] invoked the language of the Bible in private and in public his whole life. It had a strong influence on Washington's mind, and morals, and speech... as a statesman."⁹

Washington was especially fond of agrarian biblical metaphors such as "wheat and tares," turning "swords into ploughshares," and sitting in peace under a "vine and fig tree." ... Washington adapted those prophetic lines on several occasions as president. In a 1791 letter to Catherine Macaulay Graham, he combined the allusion from Micah with the New Testament verses Matthew 24:6 and Mark 13:7, predicting "wars and rumors of wars." The "United States enjoys a scene of prosperity and tranquillity under the new government," he told her, "that could hardly have been hoped for under the old . . . while you, in Europe, are troubled with war and rumors of war, every one here may sit under his own vine and none to molest or make him afraid."¹⁰ ... Upon accepting his commission as commander of the Continental Army, Washington combined classical and biblical elements in his speech to Congress. Washington declared that "I have no lust after power but wish with as much fervency as any Man upon this wide extended Continent, for an opportunity of turning the Sword into a plow share."¹¹

We can see evidence of Washington's statesmanship at two critical junctures of the American Revolution. He understood the important difference between civil and military power and always acknowledged and respected from whence his authority came, and who he ultimately served, the people and their representatives. When his troops were destitute of food, clothing and supplies during the bitterly cold winters at Valley Forge and again at Morristown, General Washington constantly appealed to Congress. He requested, cajoled, and complained, but he never used threats or compulsion.¹² As French Major General wrote of Washington in 1782, "This is the

⁸ George Washington to James Madison, May 20, 1792, Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York; James Madison to George Washington, June 21, 1792, *James Madison Papers*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁹ Dr. Jeffrey Morrison, Associate Professor of Government, Regent University, "*Washington & Religion*," Presentation at Christopher Newport University, February 21, 2014 (http://cnu.edu/cas/past_events/washington%20seminar/).

¹⁰ GW to Catherine Macaulay Graham, July 19, 1791

¹¹ Washington to the President of Congress, Dec. 20, 1776

¹² *Brookhiser*, p. 39.

seventh year that he has commanded the army and he has obeyed Congress: more need not be said.”¹³

Then again, in 1783, after the Revolutionary War was finally over and the peace treaty was being negotiated in Paris with Great Britain, disgruntled Officers of the Continental Army privately met in Newburgh, New York on March 15th, to discuss their grievances and to consider a possible revolt, or military coup, against Congress. They were angry over the failure of Congress to honor its promises to the army regarding salary and pensions. The officers had heard that the American government was going broke and that they might not be compensated at all. Unexpectedly, Washington showed up at their unauthorized meeting. He was not entirely welcomed by his men, but nevertheless, spoke to them ... He pledged to help them obtain amends for their grievances. He encouraged them to “patriotism and patient virtue, rising superior to the pressure of the most complicated sufferings.”

However sincere, his remarks were not very well received by his men. The question of a military overthrow of Congress still hung in the balance. If Washington decided to join his men, he could march on Philadelphia and become King of America (and such was the history of leaders such as Alexander the Great and Caesar Augustus). After a long silence, Washington took out a letter from a Congressman explaining the financial difficulties of the government. After reading a portion of the letter with his eyes squinting at the small writing, Washington suddenly stopped. ... His officers stared at him, wondering... Washington then reached into his coat pocket and took out a pair of reading glasses. Few of them even knew that he wore glasses, and were surprised.

"Gentlemen," said Washington, "you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country." In that moment, Washington's men were deeply moved, even shamed, and many were quickly brought to tears, now looking with great affection at this aging man who had led them through so much. Washington read the remainder of the letter, then left without saying another word. ... After a long silence, his officers voted unanimously to submit to the rule of Congress, thus preserving the rule of law in the fledgling Republic.

Washington laid down his sword... George Washington resigned his Commission to Congress As Commander in Chief of the Army at Annapolis, Maryland, on December 23rd, 1783. We should note that this made history, as the great General of the victorious Continental Army surrendered his power back to the civil authority.

Later, as you know, after serving as President of the Constitutional Convention, Washington was unanimously elected as President of the United States under the newly ratified Constitution. In fact, 225 years ago this April 30th, in 1789, George Washington, standing on the balcony of Federal Hall on Wall Street in New York, took his oath of office with his hand on the Bible (opened to Genesis chapter 49) as the first President of the United States. His fervent wish at that time, communicated to James Madison, was “As the first of every thing [in a new government], in our situation will serve to establish a Precedent, it is devoutly wished on my part, that these precedents may be fixed on true principles.”¹⁴

As our nation’s first Chief Executive, Presidential historian Stephen F. Knott, has noted that, “Washington shaped many ... aspects of the presidency that we take for granted today. He created

¹³ JTF, Vol. II, p. 63 (the French officer was Marquis de Chastellux).

¹⁴ W. Abbott, ed., *The Papers of George Washington* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1987), 2:216-17.

the president's cabinet (and what a cabinet it was); he fulfilled his constitutional obligation to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed" ...he established (in concert with James Madison) the precedent that the president alone possessed the power to remove executive branch appointees; and perhaps most importantly, he left a legacy of respect for the new office through his deft blend of accessibility and detachment – Washington's frequent presidential tours of the nation allowed the people to see their president, although always at a distance. This was not a glad handing president who pandered to the people and tried to win their affection by presenting himself as a "regular guy." Washington believed that the people wanted to look up to their president, and that a certain amount of awe toward the office, even in a republic, was an attribute that contributed to a respectable government."¹⁵

A final observation on Washington's statesmanship to consider was made by the secretary of a British Diplomat who said that Washington "[possessed] the two great requisites of a statesman, the faculty of concealing his own sentiments and of discovering those of other men."¹⁶ As John Adams recalled years later, "He possessed the gift of silence."¹⁷ And, when it came time for him to step down as leader of the only free nation in the world, he did so humbly, returning to "the plow" at his beloved farm at Mount Vernon.

III. Washington's Farewell Address

After two terms in office, weary of party politics, personal attacks, and the rigors of public service, Washington determined to finally retire from public life to his beloved home at Mount Vernon. But, one final task weighed upon his mind -- he wished to impart his final counsel to his fellow citizens in the form of a Valedictory Address -- a discourse that he hoped might be read and remembered for generations to come. Within it he would set forth his understanding of 'true principles' or the fundamental maxims of American Liberty.

Washington took the first draft prepared by James Madison and carefully prepared his Farewell Address with the assistance of both Madison and Alexander Hamilton. Although titled as an "address," it was never given orally. President Washington delivered it to his Cabinet, and four days later, on September 19, 1796, it was published in Philadelphia, and later in other newspapers. When Thomas Jefferson [and James Madison] established the Constitutional curriculum at the University of Virginia he included Washington's Farewell Address as "as conveying political lessons of peculiar value. ..."¹⁸

It was considered as a "Founding Document" of America and was used extensively and was included in manuals for Constitutional education in schools and colleges throughout the nineteenth century. Sadly, it has been largely ignored in the modern, secondary school and university curriculum.

Abraham Lincoln shared his sentiments concerning the Farewell Address when he issued this Presidential Proclamation on February 19, 1862: "It is recommended to the people of the United States that they assemble in their customary places of meeting for public solemnities on the

¹⁵ Stephen F. Knott, "George Washington: The Indispensable President" (Article, February 20, 2014, <http://wjmi.blogspot.com/2014/02/george-washington-indispensable.html>).

¹⁶ Brookhiser, p. 79.

¹⁷ Page Smith, *John Adams*, (Garden City: Double Day & Co., 1962), p. 1084.

¹⁸ *Minutes of the Board of Visitors*, March 4, 1825, ME 19:460-61 (cited as "Minutes").

twenty-second day of February instant, and celebrate the anniversary of the birth of the Father of His Country by causing to be read to them his immortal Farewell address.”¹⁹

We hear much about "rights" in our time, but seemingly less of civic duty and individual responsibility. Ironically, though neglected, George Washington's Farewell Address not only sets forth the true principles of liberty, it effectively constitutes “the handbook of an American citizen's responsibilities.” It teaches the importance of union to our republic, loyalty to the Constitution, mutual respect among people and nations, the value of honesty, and the need for public virtue. It confirms that morality and religion are indispensable to our individual and collective happiness and constitute the “twin pillars” of America's political prosperity.

The distinguished constitutional scholar, J. Reuben Clark, Jr., revered Washington's Farewell Address and stated that it "ranks with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution itself as a sailing chart for this nation. . . ." ²⁰ As we know and feel, our nation's ship of state has turned into the wind and we are navigating increasingly stormy waters. How vital it is then now, more than ever before, for each of us to become familiar with this “sailing chart.”

There is much to learn from this founding document. Washington deals with everything from party politics, to the federal debt, to foreign relations. But, in the interests of time, I have summarized a few of the main points of the Farewell Address into a set of quotes that I call “Washington's Seven Principles of Liberty.” Let us briefly examine them:

I. *Liberty is of Divine Origin*

“No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts in the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. -- Every step, by which they have been advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.”

II. *Liberty has a Price*

"The independence and liberty you possess are the work of . . . joint efforts, of common dangers, suffering and successes."

III. *Liberty is secured by The Constitution*

"Liberty itself will find in such a government, with powers properly distributed and adjusted, its surest guardian."

IV. *Liberty requires Unity*

"[Y]our union ought to be considered as a main prop of your liberty, and that the love of the one ought to endear to you the preservation of the other."

V. *Liberty is maintained by Obedience to Law*

"Respect for [this Government's] authority, compliance with its laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true liberty."

¹⁹ Abraham Lincoln, Executive Letter dated February 19, 1862, James D. Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, (Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., 1902), 5:3289-90.

²⁰ J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *Stand Fast by Our Constitution* (Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City, 1973), pp. 24-25. J. Reuben Clark served as Under Secretary of State to President Calvin Coolidge and U. S. Ambassador to Mexico, and was the author of the *Memorandum on the Monroe Doctrine* (U. S. Government Printing Office, 1930).

VI. Liberty is dependent upon Virtue

"[V]irtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government." "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim tribute to patriotism who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness."

VII. Liberty affords the path to Happiness

"Can it be that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a nation with its virtue?"

What a wonderful companion it is to enlighten our understanding of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." And, Washington's Character and Statesmanship is no more evident than in his words of final counsel to his fellow citizens. As we might say today, "he walked the talk."

In conclusion, it is not always easy for us to remember our own immediate ancestors, let alone a man who lived and died over 200 years ago. Yet, there is a power in remaining connected to our past, to our fathers. As the Russian historian and novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, "A people which no longer remembers has lost its history and its soul." Let us ask, can a nation forget their father? Can we divorce our study of the character and statesmanship of the Father of our Nation from the social and economic realities of a country whose hearts have ostensibly turned from him, ignored his counsel, and even abandoned his legacy? In the halls of Congress, in our schools, and in our homes ... have we forgotten George Washington?

Today, many historians continue to debate whether he was a Christian or a deist – but no one who earnestly studies his life can doubt that he was a truly virtuous man, by any standard. As Thomas Jefferson said of him, Washington 'was, indeed, in every sense of the words, a wise, a good, and a great man."

Mason Weem's story of young Washington chopping down the Cherry tree was supposedly discredited decades ago, and yet if there ever was an honest statesman and President – he is that man. In spite of that, many self-anointed "experts" have continued to "chop down" Washington himself, even as prominent leaders and politicians embrace shades of dishonesty as an "art" of governance.

Finally, some of our generation have dismissed Washington as "racist" – blindly ignoring his life and his sacrifices devoted to human liberty, and the foundation that he and others laid for Lincoln and their posterity to complete the difficult work of racial equality that they first undertook. Unfortunately, we have come to expect that all great changes must be achieved in a single lifetime, or in the equivalent of a movie trilogy...

George Washington passed from this life on December 14th, 1799. In the Official Eulogy delivered by Henry Lee of Virginia, he declared that Washington was "First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen." Hopefully, something I have shared today will help further turn your heart to Washington, that our generation and generations to come will not fail to remember and honor *America's Founding Father*.