

Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

NO.7: GEORGE WASHINGTON (1732-1799)

George Washington was born into a middle gentry family in the Virginia Tidewater. When he was eleven, his father Augustus died. His half-brother, twenty-five-year-old Lawrence, became George's father figure. Early in life George aspired to become an English gentleman. When Lawrence married into the wealthy Fairfax family, a variety of social opportunities opened as George regularly visited Belvoir, the Fairfax estate, where he learned gentlemanly manners. As a teenager he had access to an old book of manners and copied 110 of them that he would attempt to live by, including:

1. Every action done in company ought to be done with some sign of respect to those that are present.
2. When in company, put not your hands to any part of the body not usually discovered [i.e., uncovered].
3. Show nothing to your friend that may affright him.
4. In the presence of others, sing not to yourself with a humming noise or drum with your fingers or feet.
5. If you cough, sneeze, sigh, or yawn, do it not loud but privately; and speak not in your yawning, but put your handkerchief or hand before your face and turn aside.
6. Sleep not when others speak, sit not when others stand, speak not when you should hold your peace, walk not on when others stop.

Through the influence of Lord Fairfax, Washington, at the age of seventeen, was appointed surveyor of Culpeper County. As a surveyor, Washington became acquainted with Indians, life in the wilderness, and wealthy investors in land. Because of this experience, Deputy Governor Dinwiddie sent Washington on several military missions to tell French soldiers from Canada, who were establishing forts in present-day western Pennsylvania, to vacate the territory claimed by Virginia. The last two of these encounters were violent and led to the French and Indian War, which became a world conflict known as the Seven Years' War. When ended in 1763, Great Britain gained possession of French Canada and Spanish Florida. Washington emerged as a military hero. But because he was a colonial, Washington was unable to obtain a commission in the British army.

Washington retired from military service and married Martha Dandridge Custis, a very wealthy widow who brought Washington 17,000 acres of land, around two hundred slaves, and two children, Jackie and Eleanor. Washington would never have children of his own. Some scholars think that Washington became sterile when, at nineteen years of age, he contracted smallpox while traveling with Lawrence, who sought relief from tuberculosis in the mild Caribbean climate of Barbados.

Washington became a successful experimental farmer on his growing estate, which included Mount Vernon. Washington purchased Mount Vernon from his widowed sister-in-law after Lawrence's death. He abandoned tobacco as the main crop and concentrated on grains and fish taken from the Potomac River, which ran the length of Mount Vernon and formed the boundary between Virginia and Maryland. He praised "the life of a Husbandman," which was in Washington's opinion "the most delectable." "It is honorable--It is amusing--and, with Judicious management, it is profitable. To see plants

rise from the earth and flourish by the superior skill, and bounty of the labourer fills a contemplative mind with ideas which are more easy to be conceived than expressed.”

Washington soon became active in opposing the new British imperial policy instituted at the end of the French and Indian War. According to Washington, the ministry was “pursuing a regular Plan at the expence of Law & justice, to overthrow our Constitutional Rights & liberties.” “As Englishmen,” Washington contended, “we could not be deprived of this essential, & valuable part of our Constitution.” By opposing British policy, Americans were merely “claiming a Right which by the Law of Nature & our Constitution we are . . . indubitably entitled to,” Washington noted. For his part, Washington did not “undertake to say where the Line between Great Britain and the Colonies should be drawn,” but he was “clearly of opinion that one ought to be drawn; & our Rights clearly ascertained.” He wished that “the dispute had been left to Posterity to determine, but the Crisis is arrived when we must assert our Rights, or Submit to every Imposition that can be heap’d upon us; till custom and use, will make us as tame, & abject Slaves, as the Blacks we Rule over with such arbitrary Sway.”

According to Washington, it was not the wish of Americans to become independent of Great Britain, but he was sure “that none of them will ever submit to the loss of those valuable rights & priviledges which are essential to the happiness of every free State, and without which, Life, Liberty & property are rendered totally insecure.” It was “the ardent wish of the warmest advocates for liberty, that peace & tranquility, upon Constitutional grounds, may be restored, & the horrors of civil discord prevented.” But if the British failed to alter their policies, “more blood will be spilt on this occasion . . . than history has ever yet furnished instances of in the annals of North America.”

Washington attended the Second Continental Congress wearing a Virginia militia officer’s uniform. Fighting having already commenced between the British army and minutemen in Massachusetts, Congress appointed Washington as commander in chief, thus converting a Massachusetts army into an American army. Throughout the war Washington avoided battles in which victory was doubtful. Through his excellent leadership skills, he was able to keep an army in the field for eight years despite the army being outnumbered, ill fed and poorly supplied with armaments, and often unpaid. In a joint expedition with the French army and navy, Washington’s victory at Yorktown, Va., in October 1781 ended most combat and guaranteed independence.

In March 1783, Washington squelched a possible coup d’état when disgruntled army officers threatened to march on Congress to demand their back pay and retirement benefits. In Washington’s address to his officers, he noted their sacrifices, and his, in service to the country. By returning to order the officers had preserved the honor and justice of the revolutionary cause. Washington ended his formal address to the officers by saying that the dignity of the officers’ conduct, which remained intact, “would afford occasion for Posterity to say, when speaking of the glorious example you have exhibited to Mankind, ‘had this day been wanting, the World had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining.’”

Two months later in June the commander in chief wrote a farewell letter to the states. In the letter he said that the United States could be great if the Union was maintained and Congress strengthened, if the country preserved public justice by paying domestic and foreign creditors and caring for widows and orphans, if a proper peacetime military establishment replaced the ineffectual state militia, and if appropriate respect was shown for government while ending sectional bickering. With this advice, Washington vowed never to serve in public office again. When in November 1783 the British finally evacuated New York City after an eight years’ occupation, Washington’s army took possession of the city. After ten days of celebrating, Washington said goodbye to his fellow officers at a dinner at Fraunces Tavern. “With a heart filled with love and gratitude,” Washington shared, “I hope that your latter years are as happy and prosperous as your former ones were glorious and honorable.” He then left to surrender his commission to Congress in Annapolis on 23 December. The next day he was home for Christmas.

After the war, Washington stayed out of public office but kept aware of the political and economic situation of the country. In December 1786 he was unanimously elected to the Constitutional Convention set to meet in Philadelphia in May 1787 to revise the Articles of Confederation. He initially turned down the appointment, but after continuous pressure from James Madison and Governor Edmund Randolph he reluctantly accepted the role. The Convention attained a quorum on 25 May 1787 and elected Washington as president. He spoke very little during the four-month Convention.

The new Constitution was sent to Congress and the states with a cover letter from Washington as the Convention's president. The letter explained the difficulties faced by the delegates. "The Constitution, which we now present, is the result of a spirit of amity, and of that mutual deference and concession which the peculiarity of our political situation rendered indispensable." All Americans presumed that Washington would be elected the country's first president if the new Constitution was adopted.

Washington succumbed to the demand to accept the presidency. Madison wrote Washington's eleven and a half minute inaugural address, which Washington delivered on 30 April 1789. He asked for little but a bill of rights. Washington assisted Madison in getting a bill of rights proposed in both houses of Congress. Washington then signed the cover letter sending the proposed amendments to the states. Two years later, with eleven states adopting, the first ten amendments to the Constitution became the Bill of Rights. Washington served four years as president with John Adams as vice president, Thomas Jefferson as secretary of state, Alexander Hamilton as secretary of the treasury, and Henry Knox as secretary of war. Washington wanted to retire after one term but was convinced by his advisors that no one else could keep the country united and out of the European war then raging. Washington agreed to stay for another term but refused a third term, saying that "while choice and prudence invite me to quit the political scene, patriotism does not forbid it." With the assistance of Hamilton, Washington wrote a farewell address that circulated throughout the country. Its theme was the importance of the "national Union" to "collective and individual happiness." Union, he wrote, "is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home; your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very Liberty which you so highly prize." He retired on 4 March 1797 and returned home as the gentleman farmer he had always hoped to be.

Washington died on 14 December 1799. Eulogies filled the newspapers as the nation mourned. Contemporaries would describe Washington for years following. Almost ten years after Washington's death, Adams listed ten of his "talents," which were more accurately virtues of nature and manners.

1. A handsome face
2. A tall stature
3. An elegant form
4. Graceful attitudes and movements
5. A large, imposing fortune
6. A Virginian. This is equivalent to five talents. Virginia geese are swans
7. Preceded by favorable anecdotes
8. The gift of silence—a most precious talent
9. Great self-command—great restraint
10. Whenever he lost his temper (as he did sometimes) his friends covered up. ■

This narrative essay is largely based on John Kaminski's short biography *George Washington: "The Man of the Age"* (2nd Edition, Madison, Wis.: Parallel Press, 2008), which, along with short biographies of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, also written by John Kaminski, was published as *The Great Virginia Triumvirate: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, & James Madison in the Eyes of Their Contemporaries* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010). *George Washington: The Man of the Age* can be read for free online through the [University of Wisconsin Library](#).

QUOTATIONS

Charles Willson Peale: Recollection of 28 December 1773

One afternoon several young gentlemen, visitors at Mount Vernon, and myself were engaged in pitching the bar, one of the athletic sports common in those days, when suddenly the colonel appeared among us. He requested to be shown the pegs that marked the bounds of our efforts; then, smiling, and without putting off his coat, held out his

hand for the missile. No sooner . . . did the heavy iron bar feel the grasp of his mighty hand than it lost the power of gravitation, and whizzed through the air, striking the ground far, very far, beyond our utmost limits. We were indeed amazed, as we stood around, all stripped to the buff, with shirt sleeves rolled up, and having thought ourselves very clever fellows, while the colonel, on retiring, pleasantly observed, "When you beat my pitch, young gentlemen, I'll try again."

Eliphalet Dyer to Joseph Trumbull, Philadelphia, 17 June 1775

You will hear that Coll. Washington is Appointed General or Commander in Chief over the Continental Army by I don't know but the Universal Voice of the Congress. I believe he will be Very Agreeable to our officers & Soldiery. He is a Gentleman highly Esteemed by those acquainted with him, though I don't believe as to his Military, & for real service he knows more than some of ours, but so it removes all jealousies, more firmly Cements the Southern to the Northern, and takes away the fear of the former lest an Enterprising eastern New England General proving Successful, might with his Victorious Army give law to the Southern & Western Gentry. This made it absolutely Necessary in point of prudence, but he is Clever, & if any thing too modest. He seems discrete & Virtuous, no harum Starum ranting Swearing fellow, but Sober, steady, & Calm. His modesty will Induce him I dare say to take & order every step with the best advice possible to be obtained in the Army.

John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, Philadelphia, 18 June 1775

There is something charming to me in the conduct of Washington. A gentleman of one of the first fortunes upon the continent, leaving his delicious retirement, his family and friends, sacrificing his ease, and hazarding all in the cause of his country! His views are noble and disinterested. He declared, when he accepted the mighty trust, that he would lay before us an exact account of his expenses, and not accept a shilling for pay.

George Washington to Martha Washington, Philadelphia, 18 June 1775

My Dearest, I am now set down to write to you on a subject which fills me with inexpressible concern—and this concern is greatly aggravated and Increased when I reflect upon the uneasiness I know it will give you. It has been determined in Congress, that the whole army raised for the defense of the American Cause shall be put under my care, and that it is necessary for me to proceed immediately to Boston to take upon me the Command of it. You may believe me my dear Patsy, when I assure you in the most solemn manner, that, so far from seeking this appointment, I have used every endeavor in my power to avoid it, not only from my unwillingness to part with you and the Family, but from a consciousness of its being a trust too great for my capacity and that I should enjoy more real happiness and felicity in one month with you, at home, than I have the most distant prospect of reaping abroad, if my stay were to be seven times seven years. But as it has been a kind of destiny, that has thrown me upon this service, I shall hope that my undertaking of it is designed to answer some good purpose. You might, and I suppose did perceive, from the Tenor of my letters, that I was apprehensive I could not avoid this appointment, as I did not even pretend to intimate when I should return—that was the case—it was utterly out of my power to refuse this appointment without exposing my Character to such censures as would have reflected dishonor upon myself, and given pain to my friends. This, I am sure, could not, and ought not to be pleasing to you, and must have lessened me considerably in my own esteem. I shall rely therefore, confidently, on That Providence which has heretofore preserved, and been bountiful to me, not doubting but that I shall return safe to you in the fall. I shall feel no pain from the Toil or the danger of the Campaign. My happiness will flow, from the uneasiness I know you will feel from being left alone. I therefore beg of you to summon your whole fortitude and Resolution, and pass your time as agreeably as possible—nothing will give me so much sincere satisfaction as to hear this, and to hear it from your own Pen.

John Adams to William Tudor, Philadelphia, 20 June 1775

You will be pleased with him. He is brave, wise, generous and humane.

Charles Carroll of Annapolis to Charles Carroll of Carrollton, 24 June 1775

I am pleased with Washington's appointment to be Generalissimo, there may be as brave & as good Officers to the Northward, but we know Him to be a Cool, prudent Man.

Abigail Adams to John Adams, Braintree, Mass., 16 July 1775

I was struck with General Washington. You had prepared me to entertain a favorable opinion of him, but I thought the one half was not told me. Dignity with ease, and complacency, the Gentleman and Soldier look agreeably blended in him. Modesty marks every line and feature of his face.

Benjamin Rush to Thomas Ruston, Philadelphia, 29 October 1775

General Washington has astonished his most intimate friends with a display of the most wonderful talents for the government of an army. His zeal, his disinterestedness, his activity, his politeness, and his manly behavior to General Gage in their late correspondence have captivated the hearts of the public and his friends. He seems to be one of those illustrious heroes whom providence raises up once in three or four hundred years to save a nation from ruin. If you do not know his person, perhaps you will be pleased to hear that he has so much martial dignity in his deportment that you would distinguish him to be a general and a soldier from among ten thousand people. There is not a king in Europe that would not look like a valet de chamber by his side.

Thomas Paine: The American Crisis I, 19 December 1776

Voltaire has remarked, that King William never appeared to full advantage but in difficulties and in action; the same remark may be made on General Washington, for the character fits him. There is a natural firmness in some minds which cannot be unlocked by trifles, but which, when unlocked, discovers a cabinet of fortitude; and I reckon it among those kind of public blessings, which we do not immediately see, that GOD hath blest him with uninterrupted health, and given him a mind that can even flourish upon care.

Samuel Shaw to Francis Shaw, Morristown, N.J., 7 January 1777

Our army love our General very much, but yet they have *one thing against him*, which is the little care he takes of himself in any action. His personal bravery, and the desire he has of animating his troops by example, make him fearless of any danger. This, while it makes him appear great, occasions us much uneasiness. But Heaven, who has hitherto been his shield, I hope will still continue to guard so valuable a life.

Robert Morris to George Washington, Philadelphia, 27 February 1777

I do not like to be too sanguine & yet it is very necessary in a Contest like this we are engaged in to view the best side of the picture frequently, remember good Sir, that few men ever Keep their feelings to themselves, & that it is necessary for example sake, that all leaders should feel & think old in order to inspirit those that look up to them. Heaven (no doubt for the Noblest purposes) has blessed you with a Firmness of Mind, Steadiness of Countenance and patience in Sufferings that give You infinite advantages over other Men. This being the case You are not to depend on other People's exertions being equal to your own. One Mind feels & thrives on misfortunes by finding resources to get the better of them, another sinks under their weight, thinking it impossible to resist and as the latter description probably includes the Majority of Mankind we must be cautious of alarming them. Under this Idea I have been backward about removing the public Stores, well knowing that a panic is sooner Caused than retrieved, and I confess myself much hurt At finding you Concerned. Your admonitions on that score were not attended to; during our greatest alarm here and when our prospects were at the Worst. When my inward feelings were most wrung, I put a good face on things and was then Convinced it was of infinite use. I hate deception and cannot wish any thing like it should ever escape You, but I really think if the bright side of our affairs were sometimes to be painted by your pen or Sanctified by your Name it would draw forth the exertions of Some good Men sooner than distress does from others.

Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant to James Lovell, Lancaster, Pa., 20 November 1777

Things look gloomy enough below. We want a General; thousands of Lives & Millions of Property are yearly sacrificed to the Insufficiency of our Commander in Chief. Two Battles he has lost for us by two such Blunders as might have disgraced a Soldier of three Months Standing; and yet we are so attached to this Man that I fear we shall rather sink with him than throw him off our Shoulders. And sink we must under his Management. Such Feebleness & Want of Authority, such Confusion & Want of Discipline, such Waste, such Destruction will exhaust the Wealth of both the Indies & annihi-

late the Armies of all Europe & Asia. Twenty Thousand Recruits annually would be absolutely necessary to maintain an Army of forty thousand. I believe this is the most moderate Calculation. In the mean Time People are so disaffected to the Service that no more Recruits can be got. In short, I am quite a Convert to Abraham Clarke's Opinion; that we may talk of the Enemy's Cruelty as we will, but we have no greater Cruelty to complain of than the Management of our Army.

Samuel Shaw to the Rev. Mr. Eliot of Boston, Artillery Park, about 24 miles west of Philadelphia, 12 April 1778

It would be paying very little attention to that warm attachment which you so justly have to our illustrious Commander-in-chief, were I to omit acquainting you, that he enjoys a perfect state of health, and is the same steady, amiable character he ever has been. His fortitude, patience, and equanimity of soul, under the discouragements he has been obliged to encounter, ought to endear him to his country,—it has done it exceedingly to the army. When I contemplate the virtues of the man, uniting in the citizen and soldier, I cannot too heartily coincide with the orator for the Fifth of March last, who so delicately describes him, as a person that appears to be raised by Heaven to show how high humanity can soar. It will afford you no small pleasure to be told, that the faction which was breeding last winter in order to traduce the first character on the Continent is at an end.

Alexander Hamilton to Elias Boudinot, New Brunswick, N.J., 5 July 1778

[On Washington at the Battle of Monmouth.] As we approached the supposed place of action we heard some flying rumors of what had happened in consequence of which the General rode forward and found the troops retiring in the greatest disorder and the enemy pressing upon their rear. I never saw the general to so much advantage. His coolness and firmness were admirable. He instantly took measures for checking the enemy's form and make a proper disposition. He then rode back and had the troops formed on a very advantageous piece of ground; in which and in other transactions of the day General Greene & Lord Stirling rendered very essential service, and did themselves great honor. The sequel is, we beat the enemy and killed and wounded at least a thousand of their best troops. America owes a great deal to General Washington for this day's work; a general rout, dismay and disgrace would have attended the whole army in any other hands but his. By his own good sense and fortitude he turned the fate of the day. Other officers have great merit in performing their parts well; but he directed the whole with the skill of a Master workman. He did not hug himself at a distance and leave an Arnold to win laurels for him; but by his own presence, he brought order out of confusion, animated his troops and led them to success.

Marquis de Lafayette to George Washington, Chavaniac in the Province of Auvergne, France, 22 July 1783

Never did a man exist who so honorably stood in the opinions of mankind, and your name, if possible, will become still greater in posterity. Everything that is Great, and everything that is Good were not hitherto united in one man. Never did one man live whom the soldier, statesman, patriot, and philosopher could equally admire, and never was a Revolution brought about, that in its motives, its conduct, and its consequences could so well immortalize its Glorious Chief. I am proud of you, My dear General, your Glory makes me feel as if it was my own—and while the world is gaping at you, I am pleased to think, and to tell, the qualities of your heart do render you still more valuable than anything you have done.

James McHenry to Margaret Caldwell, Annapolis, Md., 23 December 1783

Today my love the General at a public audience made a deposit of his commission and in a very pathetic [i.e., emotional] manner took leave of Congress. It was a Solemn and affecting spectacle; such an one as history does not present. The spectators all wept, and there was hardly a member of Congress who did not drop tears. The General's hand which held the address shook as he read it. When he spoke of the officers who had composed his family, and recommended those who had continued in it to the present moment to the favorable notice of Congress he was obliged to support the paper with both hands. But when he commended the interests of his dearest country to almighty God, and those who had the superintendence of them to his holy keeping, his voice faltered and sunk, and the whole house felt his agitations. After the pause which was necessary for him to recover himself, he proceeded to say in the most penetrating manner, "Having now finished the work assigned me I retire from the great theater of action, and bidding an affectionate farewell to this august body under whose orders I have so long acted I here offer my commission and take my leave of all the employments of public life." So saying he drew out from his bosom his commission and delivered it

up to the president of Congress. He then returned to his station, when the president read the reply that had been prepared—but I thought without any show of feeling, though with much dignity.

Marquis de Lafayette to George Washington, Paris, 10 January 1784

My dear general Now is at Mount Vernon where He Enjoys those titles Every Heart Gives Him, As the Saviour of His Country, the Benefactor of Mankind, the Protecting Angel of liberty, the pride of America, and the Admiration of the two Hemispheres—and Among all those Enjoyments I know He Will Most tenderly feel the pleasure of Embracing His Best His Bosom friend, His Adopted Son, who Early in the Spring Will Be Blessed With a direct Course to the Beloved landing that leads to the House at Mount Vernon.

George Washington to the Marquis de Lafayette, Mount Vernon, 1 February 1784

At length my Dear Marquis I am become a private citizen on the banks of the Potomac, & under the shadow of my own Vine & my own Fig-tree, free from the bustle of a camp & the busy scenes of public life, I am solacing myself with those tranquil enjoyments, of which the Soldier who is ever in pursuit of fame—the Statesman whose watchful days & sleepless nights are spent in devising schemes to promote the welfare of his own—perhaps the ruin of other countries, as if this Globe was insufficient for us all—& the Courtier who is always watching the countenance of his Prince, in hopes of catching a gracious smile, can have very little conception. I am not only retired from all public employments, but I am retiring within myself; & shall be able to view the solitary walk, & tread the paths of private life with heartfelt satisfaction. Envious of none, I am determined to be pleased with all, & this my dear friend, being the order for my march. I will move gently down the stream of life, until I sleep with my Fathers. . . . at Annapolis where Congress were then, and are now sitting, I did, on the 23d of December present them my Commission, & made them my last bow—& on the Eve of Christmas entered these doors, an older man by near nine years, than when I left them, is very uninteresting to any but myself.

George Washington to James Craik, Mount Vernon, 25 March 1784

I do not think vanity is a trait of my character.

Elkanah Watson: Memoirs, 23-25 January 1785

I had feasted my imagination for several days in the near prospect of a visit to Mount Vernon, the seat of Washington. No pilgrim ever approached Mecca with deeper enthusiasm. I arrived there in the afternoon of January 23d, '85. I was the bearer of the letter from Gen. Greene [introducing Watson] with another from Col. Fitzgerald, one of the former aids of Washington, and also the books from Granville Sharp. Although assured that these credentials would secure me a respectful reception, I trembled with awe as I came into the presence of this great man. I found him at table with Mrs. Washington and his private family, and was received in the native dignity and with that urbanity so peculiarly combined in the character of a soldier and eminent private gentleman. He soon put me at ease, by unbending, in a free and affable conversation.

The cautious reserve, which wisdom and policy dictated, whilst engaged in rearing the glorious fabric of our independence, was evidently the result of consummate prudence, and not characteristic of his nature. Although I had frequently seen him in the progress of the Revolution, and had corresponded with him from France in '81 and '82, this was the first occasion on which I had contemplated him in his private relations. I observed a peculiarity in his smile, which seemed to illuminate his eye; his whole countenance beamed with intelligence, while it commanded confidence and respect. The gentleman who had accompanied me from Alexandria, left in the evening, and I remained alone in the enjoyment of the society of Washington, for two of the richest days of my life. I saw him reaping the reward of his illustrious deeds, in the quiet shade of his beloved retirement. He was at the matured age of fifty-three. Alexander and Caesar both died before they reached that period of life, and both had immortalized their names. How much stronger and nobler the claims of Washington to immortality! In the impulses of mad and selfish ambition, they acquired fame by wading to the conquest of the world through seas of blood. Washington, on the contrary, was parsimonious of the blood of his countrymen, and stood forth, the pure and virtuous champion of their rights, and formed for them (not himself), a mighty Empire.

To have communed with such a man in the bosom of his family, I shall always regard as one of the highest privileges, and most cherished incidents of my life. I found him kind and benignant in the domestic circle, revered and beloved by all around him; agreeably social, without ostentation; delighting in anecdote and adventures, without assumption; his domestic arrangements harmonious and systematic. His servants seemed to watch his eye, and to anticipate his every wish; hence a look was equivalent to a command. His servant Billy, the faithful companion of his military career, was always at his side. Smiling content animated and beamed on every countenance in his presence.

The first evening I spent under the wing of his hospitality, we sat a full hour at table by ourselves, without the least interruption, after the family had retired. I was extremely oppressed by a severe cold and excessive coughing, contracted by the exposure of a harsh winter journey. He pressed me to use some remedies, but I declined doing so. As usual after retiring, my coughing increased. When some time had elapsed, the door of my room was gently opened, and on drawing my bed-curtains, to my utter astonishment, I beheld Washington himself, standing at my bedside, with a bowl of hot tea in his hand. I was mortified and distressed beyond expression. This little incident, occurring in common life with an ordinary man, would not have been noticed; but as a trait of the benevolence and private virtue of Washington, deserves to be recorded.

George Washington to Francis Hopkinson, Mount Vernon, 16 May 1785

[Washington responds favorably to Hopkinson's request that he sit for a portrait by Robert Edge Pine.] In for a penny, in for a pound, is an old adage. I am so hackneyed to the touches of the Painter's pencil, that I am *now* altogether at their beck, and sit like patience on a Monument whilst they are delineating the lines of my face.

It is a proof among many others, of what habit & custom can effect. At first I was as impatient at the request, and as restive under the operation, as a Colt is of the Saddle— The next time, I submitted very reluctantly, but with less flouncing. Now, no dray moves more readily to the Thill, than I do to the Painters Chair.

George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull, Jr., Mount Vernon, 1 October 1785

My principal pursuits are of a rural nature, in which I have great delight, especially as I am blessed with the enjoyment of good health—Mrs. Washington on the contrary is hardly ever well.

Robert Hunter, Jr.: Travel Diary, 16 November 1785

When Colonel Fitzgerald introduced me to the General, I was struck with his noble and venerable appearance. It immediately brought to my mind the great part he had acted in the late war. The General is about six foot high, perfectly straight and well made, rather inclined to be lusty. His eyes are full and blue and seem to express an air of gravity. His nose inclines to the aquiline; his mouth small; his teeth are yet good; and his cheeks indicate perfect health. His forehead is a noble one, and he wears his hair turned back, without curls (quite in the officer's style) and tied in a long queue behind. Altogether, he makes a most noble, respectable appearance, and I really think him the first man in the world. After having had the management and care of the whole Continental Army, he has now retired without receiving any pay for his trouble. And though solicited by the King of France and some of the first characters in the world to visit Europe he has denied them all and knows how to prefer solid happiness in his retirement to all the luxuries and flattering speeches of European courts.

The General was born and educated near Fredericksburg on the Rappahannock. He must be a man of great abilities and a strong natural genius, as his master never taught him anything but writing and arithmetic. People come to see him here from all parts of the world; hardly a day passes without. But the General seldom makes his appearance before dinner, employing the morning to write his letters and superintend his farms, and allotting the afternoon to company. But even then he generally retires for two hours, between tea and supper, to his study to write.

He is one of the most regular men in the world. When no particular company is at his home, he goes to bed always at nine, and gets up with the sun. It's astonishing the packets of letters that daily come for him, from all parts of the world, which employ him most of the morning to answer, and his secretary Mr. Shaw (an acquaintance of mine) to copy and arrange. The General has all the accounts of the war yet to settle. Shaw tells me he keeps as regular books as any merchant whatever—and a daily journal of all his transactions. It's amazing the number of letters he wrote during

the war. There are thirty large folio volumes of them upstairs, as big as common ledgers, all neatly copied. The General is remarked for writing a lost elegant letter. Like the famous Addison, his writing excels his speaking. . . .

At twelve I had the honor of being lighted up to my bedroom by the General himself.

Henry Knox to George Washington, New York, 19 March 1787

As you have thought proper my dear Sir, to request my opinion respecting your attendance at the convention, I shall give it with the utmost sincerity and frankness.

I imagine that your own satisfaction or chagrin and that of your friends will depend entirely on the result of the convention—For I take it for granted that however reluctantly you may acquiesce, that you will be constrained to accept of the president's chair. Hence the proceedings of the convention will more immediately be appropriated to you than to any other person.

Were the convention to propose only amendments, and patch work to the present defective confederation, your reputation would in a degree suffer—But were an energetic, and judicious system to be proposed with Your signature, it would be a circumstance highly honorable to your fame, in the judgment of the present and future ages; and doubly entitle you to the glorious republican epithet—THE FATHER OF YOUR COUNTRY.

William Pierce: Sketches of Members of the Constitutional Convention, 1787

Genl. Washington is well known as the Commander in chief of the late American Army. Having conducted these states to independence and peace, he now appears to assist in framing a Government to make the People happy. Like Gustavus Vasa, he may be said to be the deliverer of his Country;—like Peter the great he appears as the politician and the States-man; and like Cincinnatus he returned to his farm perfectly contented with being only a plain Citizen, after enjoying the highest honor of the Confederacy,—and now only seeks for the approbation of his Country-men by being virtuous and useful. The General was conducted to the Chair as President of the Convention by the unanimous voice of its Members. He is in the 52d. year of his age.

Gouverneur Morris to George Washington, Philadelphia, 30 October 1787

I have observed that your Name to the new Constitution has been of infinite Service. Indeed I am convinced that if you had not attended the Convention, and the same Paper had been handed out to the World, it would have met with a colder Reception, with fewer and weaker Advocates, and with more and more strenuous Opponents. As it is, should the Idea prevail that you would not accept of the Presidency it would prove fatal in many Parts. Truth is, that your great and decided Superiority leads Men willingly to put you in a Place which will not add to your personal Dignity, nor raise you higher than you already stand: but they would not willingly put any other Person in the same Situation because they feel the Elevation of others as operating (by Comparison) the Degradation of themselves. And however absurd this Idea. you will agree with me that Men must be treated as Men and not as Machines, much less as Philosophers, & least of all Things as reasonable Creatures; seeing that in Effect they reason not to direct but to excuse their Conduct.

Thus much for the public Opinion on these Subjects, which must not be neglected in a Country where Opinion is every Thing. I will add my Conviction that of all Men you are best fitted to fill that Office. Your steady Temper is *indispensably necessary* to give a firm and manly Tone to the new Government. To constitute a well poised political Machine is the Task of no common Workman; but to set it in Motion requires still greater Qualities. When once a-going, it will proceed a long Time from the original Impulse. Time gives to primary Institutions the mighty Power of Habit, and Custom, the Law both of Wise Men and Fools, serves as the great Commentator of human Establishments, and like other Commentators as frequently obscures as it explains the Text. No Constitution is the same on Paper and in Life. The Exercise of Authority depends on personal Character; and the Whip and Reins by which an able Charioteer governs unruly Steeds will only hurl the unskillful Presumer with more speedy & headlong Violence to the Earth. The Horses once trained may be managed by a Woman or a Child; not so when they first feel the Bit. And indeed among these thirteen Horses now about to be coupled together there are some of every Race and Character. They will listen to your Voice, and submit to your Control; you therefore must I say *must* mount the Seat. That the Result may be as pleasing to you as it will be use-

ful to them I wish but do not expect. You will however on this, as on other Occasions, feel that interior Satisfaction & Self Approbation which the World cannot give; and you will have in every possible Event the Applause of those who know you enough to respect you properly.

Benjamin Franklin: Codicil to His Will, 1789

My fine crab-tree walking-stick, with a gold head curiously wrought in the form of the cap of liberty, I give to my friend, and the friend of mankind, *General Washington*. If it were a Sceptre, he has merited it, and would become it.

Erkuries Beatty to Josiah Harmar, New York, 23 May 1789

I attend the President's Levee (which is on Tuesdays & Fridays between two & three O'Clock) generally every ten days or two Weeks, & I have the Honor to say that the Old Gentleman looks kindly yet on a Regimental Coat—He lives very retired, neither entertains Company, nor dines out, frequently walks the Streets with no other person but Colo. Humphreys & sometimes rides.

Fisher Ames to George Richards Minot, New York, 3 May 1789

I was present [at the inauguration of Washington] in the pew with the President, and must assure you that, after making all deductions for the delusion of one's fancy in regard to characters, I still think of him with more veneration than for any other person. Time has made havoc upon his face. That, and many other circumstances not to be reasoned about, conspire to keep up the awe which I brought with me. He addressed the two Houses in the Senate chamber; it was a very touching scene, and quite of the solemn kind. His aspect grave, almost to sadness; his modesty, actually shaking; his voice deep, a little tremulous, and so low as to call for close attention; added to the series of objects presented to the mind, and overwhelming it, produced emotions of the most affecting kind upon the members. I, Pilgarlic, sat entranced. It seemed to me an allegory in which virtue was personified, and addressing those whom she would make her votaries. Her power over the heart was never greater, and the illustration of her doctrine by her own example was never more perfect.

John Adams to Richard Peters, New York, 5 June 1789

Your confidence in the thoughtful Temper and prudent Foresight of the President is perfectly well founded, and these qualities will be greatly assisted by proper Ministers.

William Smith of South Carolina to Edward Rutledge, New York, 21 June 1789

While we were struggling & contending about the President's prerogatives [in Congress over the President's power to remove officers without the consent of the Senate], he was lying extremely ill in bed—it was not known at the time, but we have been since told, that he was in some danger—I had a long conversation yesterday with his Doctor [Samuel Bard], who informed me that the President had been troubled with a Bile on his Seat, which had been so inflamed by his riding on horseback as to grow into an Imposthume as large as my two fists—this occasioned a fever of a threatening nature—it was apprehended that it would turn to a malignant one & the Doctor sat up with him one night—the fever however abated & the Imposthume has been opened—he is now considerably better & out of all danger, but will be prevented for some time from sitting up.

Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, Richmond Hill, New York, 12 July 1789

Our August President is a singular example of modesty and diffidence. He has a dignity which forbids Familiarity mixed with an easy affability which creates Love and Reverence.

James Kent: Memoirs

I visited the President at one of his public levees. . . . The President was dressed in a suit of plain cloth of a snuff color, with silk stockings, and a sword by his side. His manners were easy, but distant and reserved. His eye was expressive of mildness and reflection. His person was tall and full of dignity. No person can approach him without being penetrated with respect and reverence. Without the brilliancy of Caesar's talents, or the daring exertions of Frederick, such has been his steadiness, discretion, good sense, and integrity that no man ever attained a greater ascendancy over free minds or ever reigned so long and so completely in the hearts of a sober and intelligent people.

Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, New York, 5 January 1790

[Washington] has so happy a faculty of appearing to accommodate & yet carrying his point, that if he was not really one of the best intentioned men in the world he might be a very dangerous one. He is polite with dignity, affable without familiarity, distant without Haughtiness, Grave without Austerity, Modest, Wise & Good. These are traits in his Character which peculiarly fit him for the exalted station he holds, and God Grant that he may Hold it with the same applause & universal satisfaction for many many years, as it is my firm opinion that no other man could rule over this great people & consolidate them into one mighty Empire but He who is set over us.

Abraham Baldwin to Joel Barlow, New York, 8 May 1790

Our great and good man has been unwell again this spring. I never saw him more emaciated, he has been out for a ride on Long Island for ten days, and since his return appears manifestly better. If his health should not get confirmed soon, we must send him out to Mount Vernon to farm it a-while, and let the Vice manage here; his habits require so much exercise, and he is so fond of his plantation, that I have no doubt it would soon restore him. It is so important to us to keep him alive as long as he can live, that we must let him cruise as he pleases, if he will only live and let us know it. His name is always of vast importance but any body can do the greater part of the work that is to be done at present, he has got us well launched in the new ship.

Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, New York, 30 May 1790

He has been in a most dangerous state, and for two or three days I assure you I was most unhappy. I dreaded his death from a cause that few persons, and only those who know me best, would believe. It appears to me that the union of the states, and consequently the permanency of the Government depend under Providence upon his Life. At this early day when neither our Finances are arranged nor our Government sufficiently cemented to promise duration, His death would I fear have had most disastrous consequences. I feared a thousand things which I pray I never may be called to experience. Most assuredly I do not wish for the highest Post.

John Brown to Harry Innes, 18 June 1790

The President's life was lately despaired of by all in this place but it is with great pleasure I can assure you of his recovery—Perhaps the happiness of a Country never depended so much upon the life of one man as that of America does upon his.

Thomas Jefferson to William Short, Philadelphia, 16 March 1791

To overdo a thing with him is to undo it.

Benjamin Henry Latrobe: Journals, 19 July 1796

When my youngest Brother was about six years old he went with the family to see the king of England go through St. James's park in State to the House of Lords. Upon being told that he rode in such and such a carriage, he would scarcely believe that the person he saw could be the king; and being assured that he really was so, he cried out: "*Good lord, papa, how like a man he looks.*" The Sentiment *expressed* by the boy, is, I believe, *felt* by every man who sees for the first time a man raised by merit or reputation above the common level of his fellow creatures. It was impressed upon me, upon seeing one of the greatest men that Nature ever produced, but in a less degree that even when I saw that least-like-a-man-looking-king Frederic the Second of Prussia. Washington has something uncommonly majestic and commanding in his walk, his address, his figure and his countenance. His face is characterized however more by intense and powerful thought, than by quick and fiery conception. There is a mildness about its expression; and an air of reserve in his manner lowers its tone still more. He is 64, but appears some years younger, and has sufficient apparent vigor to last many years yet. He was frequently entirely silent for many minutes during which time an awkwardness seemed to prevail in every one present. His answers were often short and sometimes approached to moroseness. He did not at any time speak with very remarkable fluency:—perhaps the extreme correctness of his language which almost seemed studied prevented that effect. He seemed to enjoy a humorous observation, and made several himself. He laughed heartily several times and in a very good humored manner. On the morning of my departure he treated me as if I had lived for years in his house; with ease and attention, but in general I thought there was a slight air of moroseness about him, as if something had vexed him.

James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, 18 February 1798

There never was perhaps a greater contrast between two characters, than between those of the present President [John Adams] & of his predecessor, although it is the boast & prop of the latter, that he treads in the steps of the former: The one cold considerate & cautious, the other headlong & kindled into flame by every spark that lights on his passions: the one ever scrutinizing into the public opinion, and ready to follow where he could not lead it: the other insulting it by the most adverse sentiments & pursuits: W. a hero in the field, yet over-weighing every danger in the Cabinet—A. without a single pretension to the character of Soldier, a perfect Quixote as a Statesman: the former chief Magistrate pursuing peace every where with sincerity, though mistaking the means; the latter taking as much pains to get into war, as the former took to keep out of it. The contrast might be pursued into a variety of other particulars—the policy of the one in shunning connections with the arrangements of Europe, of the other in holding out the U.S. as a makeweight in its Balances of power: the avowed exultation of W. in the progress of liberty every where, & his eulogy on the Revolution & people of France posterior even to the bloody reign & fate of Robespierre—the open denunciations by Adams of the smallest disturbance of the ancient discipline, order & tranquility of Despotism, &c. &c. &c.

Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz: *Travels through America*, 5 June 1798

Since his retirement he has led a quiet and regular life. He gets up at 5 o'clock in the morning, reads or writes until seven. He breakfasts on tea and cakes made from maize; because of his teeth he makes slices spread with butter and honey. He then immediately goes on horseback to see the work in the fields; sometimes in the middle of a field he holds council of war with Mr. Addison [the overseer]. He returns at two o'clock, dresses, goes to dinner. If there are guests, he loves to chat after dinner with a glass of Madeira in his hand. After dinner he diligently reads the newspapers, of which he receives about ten of different kinds. He answers letters, etc. Tea at 7 o'clock; he chats until nine, and then he goes to bed.

*The event proves well the wisdom of her course. Ovid., *Heroides*, II, line 85.

Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, Philadelphia, 8 June 1798

It was General W.'s wish to make Friends of foes, and he aimed at converting over those who were lukewarm.

Alexander Hamilton: *General Orders*, Philadelphia, 21 December 1799

'Tis only for me to mingle my tears with those of my fellow soldiers, cherishing with them the precious recollection, that while others are paying a merited tribute to "*The man of the age*," we in particular allied as we were to him by a close tie, are called to mourn the irreparable loss of a kind and venerated Patron and father!

Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, Philadelphia, 22 December 1799

I wrote to you the day after we received the account of the death of General Washington. This Event so important to our Country at this period, will be universally deplored. No Man ever lived, more deservedly beloved and Respected. The praise and I may say adulation which followed his administration for several years, never made him forget that he was a Man, subject to the weakness and frailty attached to human Nature. He never grew giddy, but ever maintained a modest diffidence of his own talents, and if that was an error, it was of the amiable and engaging kind, tho it might lead sometimes to a want of decisions in some great Emergencies. Possessed of power, possessed of an extensive influence, he never used it but for the benefit of his Country. Witness his retirement to private Life when Peace closed the scenes of War; When called by the unanimous suffrages of the People to the chief Majestracy of the Nation, he acquitted himself to the satisfaction and applause of all Good Men. When assailed by faction, when reviled by Party, he suffered with dignity, and Retired from his exalted station with a Character which malice could not wound, nor envy tarnish. If we look through the whole tenor of his Life, History will not produce to us a Parallel. Heaven has seen fit to take him from us. Our Mourning is sincere, in the midst of which, we ought not to lose sight of the Blessings we have enjoyed and still partake of, that he was spared to us, until he saw a successor filling his place, pursuing the same system which he had adopted, and that in times which have been equally dangerous and Critical. It becomes not me to say more upon this Head.

Alexander Hamilton to Tobias Lear, New York, 2 January 1800

Your letter of the 15 of December last was delayed in getting to hand by the circumstance of its having gone to New York while I was at Philadelphia and of its having arrived at Philadelphia after I had set out on my return to New York.

The very painful event which it announces had, previously to the receipt of it, filled my heart with bitterness. Perhaps no man in this community has equal cause with myself to deplore the loss. I have been much indebted to the kindness of the General, and he was an Aegis very essential to me. But regrets are unavailing. For great misfortunes it is the business of reason to seek consolation. The friends of General Washington have very noble ones. If virtue can secure happiness in another world he is happy. In this the Seal is now put upon his Glory. It is no longer in jeopardy from the fickleness of fortune.

P.S. In whose hands are his papers gone? Our very confidential situation will not permit this to be a point of indifference to me.

Daniel Webster to James Hervey Bingham, Salisbury, Mass., 5 February 1800

Washington, the great political cement dead.

Timothy Dwight: *Discourse on the Character of Washington*, 22 February 1800

. . . wherever he appeared, an instinctive awe and veneration attended him on the part of all men. Every man, however great in his own opinion, or in reality, shrunk in his presence, and became conscious of an inferiority, which he never felt before. Whilst he encouraged every man, particularly every stranger, and peculiarly every diffident man, and raised him to self possession, no sober person, however secure he might think himself of his esteem, ever presumed to draw too near him.

Timothy Dwight: *Discourse on the Character of Washington*, 22 February 1800

To his conduct, both military and political, may, with exact propriety, be applied the observation, which has been often made concerning his courage; that in the most hazardous situations no man ever saw his countenance change.

Letter from Alexander Hamilton Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, New York, 24 October 1800

Very different from the practice of Mr. Adams was that of the modest and sage Washington. He consulted much, pondered much, resolved slowly, resolved surely.

Benjamin Rush to John Adams, 15 December 1807

Upon the talent of his [Washington's] taciturnity, Mr. Liston* gave me the following anecdote: "That he was the only person he had ever known (and he had conversed with several crowned heads and many of the first nobility in Europe) who made *no reply* of any kind to a question that he did not choose to answer."

*Robert Liston, the British minister to the United States.

Benjamin Rush to John Adams, 12 February 1812

I do not even wish it to be known that General W. was deficient in that mark of true greatness which so preeminently characterized Julius Caesar, Henry the 4th of France, and Frederick the 2nd of Prussia—the talent to forgive.

Thomas Jefferson to Walter Jones, Monticello, 2 January 1814

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, without being of the very first order; his penetration strong, though not so acute as that of a Newton, Bacon, or Locke; and as far as he saw, no judgment was ever sounder. It was slow in operation, being little aided by invention or imagination, but sure in conclusion. . . . 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, no motives of interest or consanguinity, of friendship or hatred, being able to bias his decision. He

was, indeed, in every sense of the words, a wise, a good, and a great man. His temper was naturally high toned; but reflection and resolution had obtained a firm and habitual ascendancy over it. If ever, however, it broke its bonds, he was most tremendous in his wrath. In his expenses he was honorable, but exact; liberal in contributions to whatever promised utility; but frowning and unyielding on all visionary projects and all unworthy calls on his charity. His heart was not warm in its affections; but he exactly calculated every man's value, and gave him a solid esteem proportioned to it. 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. Although in the circle of his friends, where he might be unreserved with safety, he took a free share in conversation, his colloquial talents were not above mediocrity, possessing neither copiousness of ideas, nor fluency of words. In public, when called on for a sudden opinion, he was unready, short and embarrassed. Yet he wrote readily, rather diffusely, in an easy and correct style. This he had acquired by conversation with the world, for his education was merely reading, writing and common arithmetic, to which he added surveying at a later day. His time was employed in action chiefly, reading little, and that only in agriculture and English history. His correspondence became necessarily extensive, and with journalizing his agricultural proceedings, occupied most of his leisure hours within doors. 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, and to place him in the same constellation with whatever worthies have merited from man an everlasting remembrance. 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 government, new in its forms and principles, until it had 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.

. . . He was no monarchist from preference of his judgment. The soundness of that gave him correct views of the rights of man, and his severe justice devoted him to them. He has often declared to me that he considered our new constitution as an experiment on the practicability of republican government, and with what dose of liberty man could be trusted for his own good; that he was determined the experiment should have a fair trial, and would lose the last drop of his blood in support of it.

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

James Madison: Detached Memorandum, before 1832

On important questions to be decided by him [Washington], he spared no pains to gain information from all quarters; freely asking from all whom he held in esteem, and who were intimate with him, a free communication of their sentiments, receiving with great attention the different arguments and opinions offered to him, and making up his own judgment with all the leisure that was permitted. If any erroneous changes took place in his views of persons and public affairs near the close of his life as has been insinuated, they may probably be accounted for by circumstances which threw him into an exclusive communication with men of one party, who took advantage of his retired situation to make impressions unfavorable to their opponents. ■

