



WHAT MADE GEORGE WASHINGTON GREAT?

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It's hard to imagine there would have been a United States of America without George Washington. He was there at the birth of the nation. He successfully guided it through war and nurtured it in peace.

How did he do it?

Not by being a great general, a potent political theorist, or even a clever politician. He was none of those things. And yet, he was admired by generals, political theorists and politicians. Why?

Because he was a man great men trusted. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison and so many others looked up to him—literally. He was one of the tallest men of his era at six-foot-three. Add courage, integrity, and wisdom, and you have a truly impressive figure.

Let's start with his courage. That was never in doubt. If anything, he had too much of it. Bold to the point of rashness as a young man, he fought for the British against the French over control of the Ohio Valley, then the Western-most point of the American wilderness.

Throughout that conflict, known as the French and Indian War, and the American Revolution, Washington was always in the thick of the action. His aides often struggled to keep him from surging too far ahead of his own troops. In one battle, his coat was pierced four times by musket fire. Horses were shot out from under him. Amazingly, some would say miraculously, he was never wounded—not so much as a flesh wound.

By the time the revolution broke out in April of 1775, Washington was firmly committed to the cause of American independence. He arrived in Philadelphia in May of that year to offer his services to the Continental Congress. He was quickly made commander of the new rebel army. There was only one problem: there was no army to speak of. There was just a rag-tag collection of state militias. How was Washington going to defeat the greatest military force in the world with that?

It was a problem the general struggled with for eight and a half years. That he managed to hold the army together, organize it into a disciplined fighting force and guide it to victory was testament to his fortitude, his patience, and his personal bravery.

Of his integrity, one need only to look at what he did when the war ended: exactly what he

promised to do when the war began. He resigned his military command and went home to Mt. Vernon.

By stepping down, Washington raised himself up as the embodiment of republican heroism. It is said that King George III asked the London-based American painter Benjamin West what Washington was likely to do when peace came. West replied that Washington would probably return to his farm. The king was astounded. “If he does that,” His Majesty declared, “he will be the greatest man in the world!”

This story may be apocryphal, but the Newburgh Rebellion, and how Washington handled it, is not. With experience had come wisdom.

As the revolution wound down, a group of officers refused to give up their arms until they were paid. If they didn’t get their money, which Congress didn’t have, they would take control of the government. It was not an idle threat. No less a figure than Alexander Hamilton was in a panic.

Washington, no great orator, sought to defuse their anger. They had risked everything to create a republican society, he told the officers. To abandon the cause now, when true victory was so close, would mean all their sacrifices would have been in vain.

However convincing the speech may have been, it was a simple gesture that carried the day. Washington concluded his remarks by reading to them a letter sent to him from a member of Congress. Suddenly, he stopped. From his pocket, he pulled a pair of spectacles. None of the officers had ever seen him wear them. Putting the glasses on, Washington said, “Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have grown gray in the service of my country and now find myself going blind.”

He finished reading the letter and left the hall without another word. The gesture, sincerely offered with just the right touch of stagecraft, pierced the hearts of his men. Many were moved to tears. They immediately passed a resolution declaring their loyalty to civilian government. George Washington had saved the revolution once again.

It wouldn’t be the last time. During the writing of the Constitution and during his eight years as President, Washington was repeatedly called upon to hold the fractious young nation together. He never failed to do so.

We commonly refer to George Washington now as the father of our country. It’s hard to imagine any nation ever had a better one.

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