

"George Washington, a Man of Unfailing Personal Integrity"

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The Battles of Lexington and Concord placed Americans into a seemingly Impossible dilemma. They were as Englishmen. Theirs was the freest society on earth, but as colonists their freedoms had been seriously abridged by an increasingly severe pattern of laws and regulations which were restricting their ability to act for themselves. Above all else they wished to preserve their beloved "rights as Englishmen" even if it meant forcing their way out of the Empire.

The Second Continental Congress, acting more as a committee than a government, was in session when word came of Lexington and Concord. Some of the leaders such as Sam and John Adams and Richard Henry Lee were determined not to lose the initiative of this thrust toward American freedom. Others, like the Morrises, John Dickenson, and Benjamin Franklin, believed that the American show of force should be limited to its objective to convincing the British that they were serious and their complaints should not be taken lightly.

Now those men, as members of Congress, had to choose a man to be commanding general of the American forces, a man who could be trusted to pursue the war with full vigor if that became appropriate, and with restraint if their overtures of peace bore fruit. Remarkably, the two groups did not each select their own candidate and then struggle over a compromise. Both sides chose Washington. He was seen by them as having enough integrity to push the war to a successful conclusion or, if need be, to become a restraining factor which would help call it off all together. They were confident that Washington would never base decisions on his own aggrandizement; they knew he could be trusted with the welfare of the nation.

Years later, after he had successfully led Americans in war and then returned to private life, Washington presided over the convention that wrote the American Constitution. Its members

were faced with another dilemma. How could they create a government strong enough to protect its citizens and yet weak enough that it could not invade their private lives? To accomplish this, they incorporated into their document a number of governmental innovations to balance and restrain the exercise of power. One of the most extraordinary controls was placing the control of the military under the direction of the civilian executive.

Opponents of the Constitution were fearful of this office, which they called the "President-General." It concentrated in one man the power to control both military and civil affairs. Professor Merrill Jensen and other eminent historians have repeatedly expressed the belief that this single issue could have been sufficient to prevent the ratification of the Constitution, had it not been for the general understanding that Washington would be the first president. Americans believed he could be trusted with those military and civil powers and therefore were willing to give the Constitution a chance.

Washington gained the trust of his peers because of his personal integrity and dedication to the cause of liberty. He was committed because he believed freedom to be a right given men by God. He maintained his personal integrity because that, too, was a part of his commitment; thus, he listened to his feelings and fulfilled his duties to posterity.

Washington once confided to a friend that what he described as "an innate spirit of freedom" first taught him to recognize the value of liberty.¹ Washington's feelings told him that the British deprivation of American rights was morally wrong. In following his conscience, he sensed that he and his fellow members of Congress had a duty to "hand down to Posterity that just and invaluable Privilege which they had received from their Ancestors."²

Washington clearly believed that the American cause was more than an uprising of the discontented. He believed freedom was a divine right ordained by God for man. As a result, he accepted the commission from Congress and traveled to Boston to command the citizens army which besieged the city.

The British showed no intent of withdrawing, notwithstanding their defeat at Bunker's Hill. Washington would not endanger the people of Boston by trying to force the British out. Winter came and Washington wrote:

I have often thought how much happier I should have been, If instead of accepting a command under such circumstances I had taken my musket on my shoulder and entered into the ranks, or, if I could have justified the measure to posterity and my own conscience had retired to the back country and lived In a wigwam.³

His conscience prevailed and he remained with his impoverished troops. His greatest fear was that the well-stocked British army would discover the desperateness of his situation and attack His men had fewer than nine rounds of ammunition per man; they could not have prevented a British advance.

If I shall be able to rise superior to these ...difficulties... , I shall most religiously believe that the finger of Providence is in it, to blind the eyes of our enemies ... [and keep them In

Boston.] 4

The British did not attack. Washington received a cannon captured from Fort Ticonderoga. The British agreed to leave Boston without burning the city, if Washington would not use the cannon to fire upon the British ships.

Later that year, the United Colonies declared their independence from England. Washington soon found himself in a life and death struggle with the greatest military power on earth. He did not have to win. He understood that He only had to prevent the British from winning.

The British defeated the inexperienced American forces at Long island, Harlem Heights, Fort Washington and Fort Lee. Washington's withdrawals kept his army intact but left their spirits in shambles. His hope remained untarnished.

You can form no Idea of the perplexity of my Situation. No Man, I believe, ever had a greater choice of difficulties and less means to extricate himself from them. However under a full persuasion of the justice of our Cause, I cannot but think the prospect will brighten... 5

He turned on the British and defeated them at Trenton and Princeton. Those victories were of little military consequence but they provided the moral boost which kept the army from disintegrating and gave it the will to endure Valley Forge.

Washington personally led his men in those battles. An officer who fought at Trenton and Princeton reported:

Our army loves their General very much, but 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, makes him fearless of danger... but "Heaven which has hitherto been his shield... will still continue to guard so valuable a life."6

Washington loved his soldiers too.

To see Men without clothes to cover their nakedness, without Blankets to lay on, without Shoes, by which their Marches might be traced by the Blood from their feet, and almost as often without Provisions as with: Marching through frost and Snow. and at Christmas taking up their Winter Quarters within a day's march of the enemy, without a House or Hut to cover them till they could be built and submitting to it without a murmur. Is a mark of patience and obedience which In my opinion can scarce be paralleled.7

Like his soldiers, Washington looked to heaven for the strength to endure.

...Providence has a joint claim to my humble and grateful thanks, for Its protection and direction of me, through the many difficult and intricate scenes, which this contest. hath

produced; and for the constant interposition in our behalf, when the clouds were heaviest and seemed ready to burst upon us.⁸

At Valley Forge Washington's followers became an army. And Washington reported that his "prospects...miraculously brightened". "Miraculously" was Washington's word and by it he meant:

The hand of Providence has been so conspicuous in all this that he must be worse than an Infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations...⁹

An example was the battle of Monmouth. Contingents of American and British forces faced each other over a large open field. The American vanguard of 5,000 troops engaged the enemy. But as Washington approached with the main body of men he was horrified to be confronted with the vanguard in full retreat

The disorder arising from it would have proved fatal to this Army had not that bountiful Providence which has never failed us In the hour of distress, enabled me to form a regiment or two (of those that were retreating), in the face of the Enemy and under their fire, by which means a stand was made long enough ...¹⁰

The American forces rallied and moved the enemy from the field that day. The victory reaffirmed Washington's belief that divine intervention was, in fact, aiding the patriot cause.

This special awareness enabled Washington to see in the struggles for freedom opportunities to refine the individual character of his men.

...ours Is a kind of struggle designed, I daresay, by Providence to try the patience, fortitude and virtue of Men; none therefore that are engaged In It, will suffer themselves, I trust to sink under difficulties or be discouraged by hardship.¹¹

Washington was confronted with many hardships. One of his most severe challenges was the Continental Congress itself. To him, Congress was too much diverted by "business of a trifling nature and personal concernment withdraws their attention from matters of great national moment at this critical period."¹²

The war made some men rich. Wealthy merchants who speculated in military supplies seemed willing to trade their country's security for personal gain. Washington complained that such men work "more effectually against us than the enemy's Arms; and are a hundred times more dangerous to our liberties and the great cause we are engaged in."¹³

Washington had no sympathy for those who would use the war for their own aggrandizement. He felt unless the civil government would "exert themselves to bring back to first principles, correct abuses, and punish our Internal foes, In-avoidable win must follow."¹⁴

Washington sought no glory from the war. His presence in the battlefields and his zeal as

commander were a response to his own love of freedom. Thus, he did not seek personal glory. Rather, his reward inherently rested in his unfailing integrity and selfless dedication to duty.

You ask how I am to be rewarded for all of this? There Is one reward that nothing can deprive me of, and that Is the consciousness of having done my duty with the strictest rectitude. and most scrupulous exactness, and the certain knowledge, that If we should, ultimately, fall In the present contest, it Is not owing to the want of exertion in me, or the application of every means that the Congress and the United States, or the States individually. have put Into my hands. 15

Because he maintained his personal integrity and purpose, Washington continued to believe that Providence would again intervene in behalf of the American cause.

[Providence] to whom we are Indefinitely more Indebted than we are to our own wisdom, or our own exertions, has always displayed its power and goodness, when clouds and thick darkness seemed ready to overwhelm us. The hour is now come when we stand such In need of another manifestation of its bounty however little we deserve it. 16

In 1780, Washington was stunned when he discovered Benedict Arnold's plot to turn not only West Point, but Washington himself, over to the British army. He clearly saw the hand of Providence in the extraordinary combination of circumstances whereby the British spy, Major Andre, an officer of proven ability, lost his composure and was exposed, along with the story of Arnold's treachery, by three militiamen.

That overruling Providence which has so often, and so remarkably interposed in our favor, never manifested itself more conspicuously than in the timely discovery of Arnold's horrid design of surrendering the Post and Garrison of West Point into the hands of the enemy.17

Washington observed that the integrity of those three underpaid militiamen had been the key element in his providential escape and that the absence of the same quality was the essence of Arnold's betrayal.

But I am mistaken if at this time, Arnold is undergoing the torments of a mental Hell. He wants feeling. From some traits of his character which lately have come to my knowledge, he seems to have been so hackneyed In villainy, and so lost to all sense of honor and shame that while his faculties will enable him to continue his sordid pursuits there will be no time for remorse. 18

By the spring of 1781, the fortunes of the American cause were at an all-time low. Coordination of the American-French forces had proved impossible because of the fluctuating American enlistments and the American government seemed as bankrupt in hope as in money. But Washington's hope and trust in divine Providence remained unshaken.

Our affairs are brought to an awful crisis, that the hand of Providence, I trust, may be more conspicuous in our Deliverance. .. The many remarkable interpositions of divine

government in the hours of our deepest distress and darkness have been too luminous to suffer me to doubt the happy Issue of the present contest.¹⁹

Ten months later Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown. Washington's call for a celebration of this victory was consistent with the hope he had expressed:

...the troops not on duty should universally attend with that seriousness of Deportment and gratitude of Heart which the recognition of such reiterated and astonishing interpositions of Providence demand of us.²⁰

Yorktown ended the war but the army remained in the field for two more years while the diplomats arranged for peace. During that time Washington struggled with Congress to get compensation for his soldiers. Congress could not, or would not, pay. In frustration, a group of officers sought to overthrow the government and make Washington king. In a simple speech in the "Temple of Liberty" in Newburgh he thwarted their move and redirected and recommitted their loyalty to the cause of freedom.

When it finally came time to disband the army, Washington traveled to Congress to make what he believed would be his last speech as a public servant. He did so firm in the belief that the Power which had established freedom would support him in defending it.

Having found divine direction in his own life because of his unerring devotion and dedication, Washington served as an example to those he led. His consistent adherence to principle was the source of his own power and belief in divine intervention on behalf of freedom. With his own unflinching integrity as a foundation, he was able to effectively appeal to the sagging integrity of his fellow officers at Newburgh and here persuade them to reaffirm their allegiance to a dangerously weak Continental Congress. If Washington had not remained true to his personal conviction that Providence had intervened on behalf of the American cause, he may have become king, and all the sacrifices of patriots to create a government of limited powers would have come to naught. Experience and insight taught him to fear the "pragmatic" proposals and theoretical disarray brought about when leaders, civil and military, fail to maintain their personal integrity.

To Washington the American Constitution was one more evidence of God's guidance in his country's affairs. He wrote:

I think we may rationally indulge the pleasing hope that the Union will now be established upon a durable basis. and that Providence seems still disposed to favour the American people with unequalled opportunities for political happiness.²¹

He described the Constitution itself this way:

Although there were some few things in the Constitution recommended by the Federal Convention to the determination of the People, which did not full accord with my wishes; yet, having taken every circumstance seriously into consideration, I was convinced It approached nearer to perfection than any government hitherto instituted among Men ...

I was also convinced, that nothing but a genuine spirit of amity and accommodation could have induced the members of the Convention to make those mutual concessions and to sacrifice (at the shrine of enlightened Liberty) those local prejudices. which seemed to oppose an insurmountable barrier. to prevent them from harmonizing in any system whatsoever.²²

Washington was not only moved by the extraordinary reconciliatory spirit which dominated the Constitutional Convention, but he gloried at the quiet, objective process with which the American people considered and adopted their new government. The success of both, he attributed to God.

But so it has happened by the good pleasure of Providence. and the same happy disposition has been diffused and fostered among the people at large. You will permit me to say, that a greater Drama is now acting on this Theater than has heretofore been brought on the American Stage, or any other in the world. We exhibit at present the Novel and astonishing Spectacle of a whole People deliberating calmly on what form of government will be most conducive to their happiness; and deciding with an unexpected degree of unanimity in favour of a System which they conceive calculated to answer the purpose.²³

In August, 1788, soon after 11 of the 13 states had ratified the Constitution, Washington wrote a letter to Dr. Thomas Ruston expressing his happiness for the fact that the new government could now be put into operation. While cautious about the project he assures the Dr.:

...that the same Power. which hath hitherto kept us from Disunion and Anarchy, will not suffer us to be disappointed... ²⁴

...in the new unity of the nation. There are many indications that Washington believed that God had been actively involved in the affairs of his countrymen from the beginning of the revolutionary movement to the adoption of the Constitution. To him it was clear that throughout this period Americans had responded to the moving hand of God and thereby secured for themselves political freedom and opportunity for happiness. Washington wrote:

...we may. with a kind of grateful and pious exultation trace the finger of Providence through those dark and mysterious events, which first Induced the States to appoint a general Convention and then led them one after another (by such steps as were best calculated to effect the object) Into an adoption of the system recommended by that general Convention; thereby, In all human probability, laying a lasting foundation for tranquility and happiness; when we had but too much reason to fear that confusion and misery were coming rapidly upon us. That the same good Providence may still continue to protect us and prevent us from dashing the cup of national felicity just as It has been lifted to our lips, is the earnest prayer.²⁵

As Washington believed that the whole of recent American history had been directed by the hand of Providence, he also believed that Providence would guide him in his new and somewhat frightening appointment as President of the United States. Washington faced his new

assignment as President, he expressed his determination to succeed in a statement which asserts his belief in the help of God and a pledge of his own integrity. He wrote:

I know the delicate nature of the duties incident to the part which I am called to perform; and I feel my Incompetence, without the singular assistance of Providence to discharge them in a satisfactory manner. But having undertaken the task, from a sense of duty, no fear of encountering difficulties and no dread of losing popularity. shall ever deter me from pursuing what I conceive to be the true interests of my Country.²⁶

Washington believed that moral integrity and obedience to the guiding hand of Providence were the keys to his own and others' political success. In the same letter just quoted he wrote:

It appears to me, that little more than common sense and common honesty, in the transactions of the community at large, would be necessary to make us a great and a happy Nation. For If the general Government, lately adopted, shall be arranged and administered In such a manner as to acquire the full confidence of the American People. I sincerely believe, they will have greater advantages. from their Natural, moral and political circumstances, for public felicity, than any other People ever possessed.²⁷

A short time later in his first official speech as President of the United States, Washington acknowledged the Divine assistance that had been given to him and to the people of the United States on providence. He wrote:

It would be peculiarly improper to omit In this first official Act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the Universe, who presides In the Councils of Nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that his benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the People of the United States ... In tendering this homage to the Great Author of every public and private good, I assure myself that it expresses your sentiments not less than my own; nor those of my fellow citizens at large, less than either. No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible hand. which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of Providencia agency.²⁸

As Washington neared the end of his second administration, a friend wrote to him expressing fears that the upcoming election would cause divisions in loyalty which would prove hurtful to the stability of the nation. Washington responded that he felt comfortable leaving office and did not share his friends fears because:

I can never believe that Providence, which has guided us so long, and through such a labyrinth. will withdraw Its protection at this Crisis.²⁹

The message for today is clear. Personal integrity is the means by which freedom and liberty are preserved. While the faces of American patriots have changed in the last 250 years, the values and issues in conflict are the same. Washington demonstrated that maintaining

personal integrity in the face of adversity is a prerequisite to receiving the trust and faith necessary to lead others in defense of liberty.

He set a standard by maintaining his personal integrity while leading the American people in the establishment of a limited government over a free people. The question today is whether we, as Americans, will likewise maintain individual integrity and thereby prepare ourselves to defend that same freedom. Washington's choice to do so has left the remaining choice to us.

FOOTNOTES

All quotations are taken from G. W. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, printed by the U.S. Government from 1931-1944 in commemoration of Washington's 200th birthday.

1. Volume III, p.240.
2. Volume III, p.431.
3. Volume IV, p.243.
4. Ibid.
5. Volume VI, p.398-399.
6. Ibid., at 470 n.44.
7. Volume XI, p.291-292.
8. Ibid. at 492.
9. Volume XII, p.343.
10. Volume XII, p.156-157.
11. Volume XIII. p. 79.
12. Volume XIV, p.301.
13. Volume XVII, p.53.
14. Volume XIV, p.300.
15. Volume XVIII, p.392.
16. Ibid.
17. Volume XX. p.213.
18. Ibid., p.173.
19. Volume XXI, p.378.
20. Volume XXIII, p. 247.
21. Writings of George Washington. 30:10
22. Writings of George Washington. 30:73
23. Writings of George Washington, 30:73
24. Writings of George Washington. 30:79
25. Writings of George Washington, 30:22
26. Ibid., 30:288
27. Ibid., 30:288
28. Ibid., 30:293
29. Ibid., 35:412

