

PROJECT TITLE:

What Did George Washington Teach Us About Being President Rather Than King?

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SUBJECT & GRADE LEVEL

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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. Primary Investigative Question – WHAT DID GEORGE WASHINGTON TEACH US ABOUT BEING PRESIDENT RATHER THAN KING?

- Contextual Essay –

America was a baby on the World Stage in the eighteenth century. Although America had gained her independence from Great Britain, there was still a great deal of influence from the Mother Country. Great Britain was and had been ruled by a Monarchy. The Monarch was considered sovereign and secured the job through birth. King James I. said it best when he said it was “of necessity that the Kings were the authors and makers of the law not the laws of the King.” A monarchy is a form of government in which supreme power is absolutely or nominally lodged with an individual, who is the head of state, often for life or until abdication, and “is wholly set apart from all other members of the state.” George Washington wanted power to reside in the hands of the people. Although he was willing to serve his country when needed, he wanted a government by the people. This leads us to the question, “What did George Washington teach us about being president rather than king?”

George Washington was a product of the British monarchy, but it was not what he wanted for America. Having gained independence from Great Britain and the rule of King George III. in the eighteenth century, Americans were ready for a different form of government. After the War for Independence, Benjamin Franklin was trying to organize a Continental Congress. George Washington was willing to help when called upon. The country needed leadership as it grew into a nation. Many felt that leader should be Washington. He was offered “President for Life” which he refused. He declared that there must be an election. George Washington wasn’t sure these United States of America would work, but he was a student of history. He knew that Greek democracy failed and the Roman Republic had succumbed to the Roman Empire and dictatorship.

When he was called back to power as the nation’s first president, he remained silent while John Adams brought great ridicule upon himself by trying unsuccessfully to get people to call Washington by an elaborate title. Washington felt he had more dignity as simply “the President of the United States.” “As chief executive rather than a highness or lord protector, Washington used skills drawn from a career organizing armies and running plantations to administer a government.” (Randall, p.

399) Upon being unanimously elected as President, Washington was charged with the awesome responsibility of setting precedents. Some of these precedents include the establishment of a social entertainment policy, the official title of office, the relationship of federal government to state government, and the selection of the presidential cabinet.

While cultural and economic links to Britain in the form of bank loans, etc. continued, political structures would not suffice for the new Republic. A major tenet of the Revolution was a dislike of the King and their monarchical ways. George Washington wanted to be clear that he was rejecting any ideas of monarchical rule. He would retire to avoid dying in office which he feared would set a precedent that smacked of monarchical longevity by permitting biology to set the terms of his tenure. By doing so, he set the precedent of the President being elected for a set period of two terms versus a King serving for life. Responsibility, therefore, for governance would lie with the people and the electoral process. The President would be responsive to the will of the people instead of a king who promoted his own will as sovereign without regards to his subjects' needs and desires. He did not want to be portrayed as Napoleon was, whom artists showed dripping in furs, velvet and jewels. The symbols in the most famous portraits of Washington were almost nonexistent. The symbols in his portraits and statue portray the simplicity of Washington.

In Washington's Farewell Address of September, 1796, he states, "The acceptance of and continuance hitherto in the office to which your suffrages have twice called me have been a uniform sacrifice of inclination to the opinion of duty and to a deference for what appeared to be your desire. I constantly hoped that it would have been much earlier in my power, consistently with motives which I was not at liberty to disregard, to return to that retirement from which I had been reluctantly drawn." He continues by "calling on his countrymen to unite, to avoid partisanship, and to stay away from the entanglements of European politics." (Farewell Address: <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3462>) Washington had wanted to create a single national character and secure liberty through national unity. "The voluntary surrender of unprecedented power struck observers as the last act of a historical drama. King George III declared that if Washington did that, he would be the greatest man of his age. It was perhaps, as Joseph Ellis put it, the greatest exit in American history." (Henriques, p. 46)

Not only did George Washington show leadership during the Revolution, Continental Congress, and the founding of our country, he also set the example of being a good citizen. He embodied honesty, humility, and integrity throughout his life. He put duty to country before his own desires. He was willing to serve and to do what was right in order for us to survive as a nation. "Washington's life was an example to his countrymen, and as he referred to us, the 'unborn millions,' of what self-government meant. He believed that self-government meant governing ourselves, which is, nurturing the honorable within all of us. He tried to teach us virtue. He tried to teach us that honor is doing what is right. He tried to teach us to stand tall."

(<http://www.aapsonline.org/jands/hacienda/comm20.html> Commentary in George Washington---First in the Hearts of His Countrymen Paul Consolazio) His qualities continue to inspire and to set an example for us to follow as citizens today. In the end, "George Washington was indispensable as the means by which Americans accommodated the change from monarchy to republicanism." (McDonald p. 186)

2. Annotated Bibliography –

Henriquez, Peter (2006). *Realistic Visionary: A Portrait of George Washington.*

Charlottesville. University of Virginia Press

Summary: Peter Henriquez tries to expose George Washington on a “real” level as he explores his life and reasons for the decisions he made. Chapter 1 points out Washington’s mistakes and consequences of possibly wanting honor for himself as he pressed his men forward toward the Ohio River. Chapter 3 shares Washington’s strong feelings for a strong national government and yet felt that the rights of citizens should be preserved. Washington also shares his strong desires to return to Mount Vernon, but agrees to put duty to his country first. Henriquez feels that Washington was not a figurehead as in some European countries, but rather the central politician of his age. It was important to Washington that he live his life with honor, but to die with honor, as well. Washington was adept in handling foreign affairs as well as those at home. Henriquez explores the leadership of Washington in his endeavors from young adulthood until his death.

Burns, James MacGregor (2004). *George Washington.*

New York. Times Books

Summary: George Washington spends a great deal of time trying to craft his self-image and the lasting effects of his presidency. This book explores the idea of Washington being a president (although Adams insists on a higher title) rather than royalty. Washington views himself as president of all the people. He wants to be a leader that rises above factional disputes. Questions of his leadership and his ability to produce lasting changes in our country are pursued. The book explores more current presidents who patterned some of the presidencies after Washington’s lead such as Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush. Burns explores the course of Washington’s presidency, taking a look at his successes (including the reshaping of the constitutional balance of powers) and failures (such as the Jay Treaty). Burns allows Washington a few faults (as in slavery), but basically treats him in a positive fashion.

McDonald, Forrest (1994). *The Presidency of George Washington.*

Kansas. University Press of Kansas

Summary: The preface states that the purpose of the American Presidency series is to present historians with scholarly interpretations of the presidents. This book strives to cover the time period, situations of that time period and how George Washington dealt with the issues. The final chapter pays tribute to his transfer of power and his retirement to Mount Vernon. The book is about the people, issues and events when Washington was president. It deals with the establishment of the national government. The Constitution did not help much, so many of the precedents set were from Washington himself. The economy was bad and trade was much-needed. Debts of the Continental Congress needed to be paid. The French Revolution was at hand and this brought European problems to America. The responses to these problems and many more are discussed in this book.

Ellis, Joseph J. (2000). *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*. New York. Vintage Books

Summary: George Washington's farewell is addressed in chapter 4. His physical prowess is extolled, but his insecurities surrounding his age are shared, as well. He sees the importance of an election so that he does not die in office. He wants the best for the new nation.

Ellis feels that there are six crucial moments in the life of the new nation of which Washington's Farewell Address was one. Even though there was much debate about the Declaration of Independence, it was important to the building of the new nation. Ellis feels that many precedents were set in motion on which future generations would rely.

Farewell Address: <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3462> This link gives a transcript of George Washington's Farewell Address from September, 1796.