**George Washington: Life in Brief**

George Washington was born into a mildly prosperous Virginia farming family in 1732. After his father died when George was eleven, George's mother, Mary, a tough and driven woman, struggled to hold their home together with the help of her two sons from a previous marriage. Although he never received more than an elementary school education, young George displayed a gift for mathematics. This knack for numbers combined with his quiet confidence and ambition caught the attention of Lord Fairfax, head of one of the most powerful families in Virginia. While working for Lord Fairfax as a surveyor at the age of sixteen, the young Washington traveled deep into the American wilderness for weeks at a time.

**British Army Service** Tragedy struck the young man with the death of his half brother Lawrence, who had guided and mentored George after his father's death. George inherited Mount Vernon from his brother, living there for the rest of his life. At the time, England and France were enemies in America, vying for control of the Ohio River Valley. Holding a commission in the British army, Washington led a poorly trained and equipped force of 150 men to build a fort on the banks of the Ohio River. On the way, he encountered and attacked a small French force, killing a French minister in the process. The incident touched off open fighting between the British and the French, and in one fateful engagement, the British were routed by the superior tactics of the French. Although hailed as a hero in the colonies when word spread of his heroic valor and leadership against the French, the Royal government in England blamed the colonials for the defeat. Angry at the lack of respect and appreciation shown to him, Washington resigned from the army and returned to farming in Virginia. In 1759, he married Martha Custis, a wealthy widow, and thereafter devoted his time to running the family plantation. By 1770, Washington had emerged as an experienced leader—a justice of the peace in Fairfax County, a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, and a respected vestryman (a lay leader in his church). He also was among the first prominent Americans to openly support resistance to England's new policies of taxation and strict regulation of the colonial economy (the Navigation Acts) beginning in the early 1770s.

**A Modest Military Leader** Washington was elected by the Virginia legislature to both the First and the Second Continental Congress, held in 1774 and 1775. In 1775, after local militia units from Massachusetts had engaged British troops near Lexington and Concord, the Second Continental Congress appointed Washington commander of all the colonial forces. Showing the modesty that was central to his character, and would later serve the young Republic so well, Washington proclaimed, "I do not think myself equal to the command I am honored with." After routing the British from Boston in the spring of 1776, Washington fought a series of humiliating battles in a losing effort to defend New York. But on Christmas Day that same year, he led his army through a ferocious blizzard, crossed the Delaware into New Jersey, and defeated the Hessian forces at Trenton. In May 1778, the French agreed to an alliance with the Americans, marking the turning point of the Revolution. Washington knew that one great victory by his army would collapse the British Parliament's support for its war against the colonies. In October 1781, Washington's troops, assisted by the French Navy, defeated Cornwallis at Yorktown. By the following spring the British government was ready to end hostilities.

**King Washington?** Following the war, Washington quelled a potentially disastrous bid by some of his officers to declare him king. He then returned to Mount Vernon and the genteel life of a tobacco planter, only to be called out of retirement to preside at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. His great stature gave credibility to the call for a new government and insured his election as the first President of the United States. Keenly aware that his conduct as President would set precedents for the future of the office, he carefully weighed every step he took. He appointed Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton to his cabinet. Almost immediately, these two men began to quarrel over a wide array of issues, but Washington valued them for the balance they lent his cabinet. Literally the "Father of the Nation," Washington almost single-handedly created a new government—shaping its institutions, offices, and political practices. Although he badly wanted to retire after the first term, Washington was unanimously supported by the electoral college for a second term in 1792. Throughout both his terms, Washington struggled to prevent the emergence of political parties, viewing them as factions harmful to the public good. Nevertheless, in his first term, the ideological division between Jefferson and Hamilton deepened, forming the outlines of the nation's first party system. This system was composed of Federalists, who supported expansive federal power and Alexander Hamilton, and the Democratic-Republicans, followers of Thomas Jefferson's philosophy of states' rights and limited federal power. Washington generally backed Hamilton on key issues, such as the funding of the national debt, the assumption of state debts, and the establishment of a national bank. Throughout his two terms, Washington insisted on his power to act independent of Congress in foreign conflicts, especially when war broke out between France and England in 1793 and he issued a Declaration of Neutrality on his own authority. He also acted decisively in putting down a rebellion by farmers in western Pennsylvania who protested a federal whiskey tax (the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794).

After he left office, exhausted and discouraged over the rise of political factions, Washington returned to Mount Vernon, where he died almost three years later. Historians agree that no one other than George Washington could have held the disparate colonies and, later, the struggling young Republic together. To the Revolution's last day, Washington's troops were ragged, starving, and their pay was months in arrears. In guiding this force during year after year of humiliating defeat to final victory, more than once paying his men out of his own pocket to keep them from going home, Washington earned the unlimited confidence of those early citizens of the United States. Perhaps most importantly, Washington's balanced and devoted service as President persuaded the American people that their prosperity and best hope for the future lay in a union under a strong but cautious central authority. His refusal to accept a proffered crown and his willingness to relinquish the office after two terms established the precedents for limits on the power of the presidency. Washington's profound achievements built the foundations of a powerful national government that has survived for more than two centuries.

**What did Washington do during his life that would impact the United States of America? Summarize in a 5-7 sentence paragraph.**

**George Washington: Domestic Affairs**

George Washington had to borrow money to relocate to New York, then the center of American government. His presidential inauguration was held near New York's Wall Street in late April 1789. A tremendous crowd showed up to see the man now known as "the Father of His Country." Borrowing a custom from English monarchs, who by tradition address Parliament when its sessions open, Washington gave a brief speech. It was the first inaugural address and the first of many contributions that Washington would make to the office of the presidency. But this would be no monarch; the new leader wore a plain brown suit.

"As the first of everything in our situation will serve to establish a precedent," Washington wrote James Madison at this time, "it is devoutly wished on my part, that these precedents may be fixed on true principles." At every turn, Washington was aware that the conduct of his presidency would set the standard for generations to come.

The American government—in particular, the presidency—was in a remarkably primitive state. But Washington's performance in those early years was both surefooted and brilliant. He went to one session of the Senate to receive its advice about a treaty but was annoyed because senators felt uncomfortable in his presence and would not debate its provisions. Washington withdrew angrily and swore he "would be damned if he went there again," thus ensuring a tradition of separation between the executive and legislative branches. Departments of State, War, and Treasury were established, along with the office of Attorney General, each headed by a trusted presidential adviser. These advisers collectively became known as the cabinet. Washington strove for ideological balance in these appointments, thus augmenting their strength and credibility. He signed the first Judiciary Act of 1789, initiating the development of the judicial branch. A Supreme Court was created, headed by a chief justice and originally five associate justices, who were chosen by the President and approved by Congress. A network of district courts was also established. Congress sent the President ten amendments to the Constitution that became known as the Bill of Rights; these amendments strengthened civil liberties.

#### The Battle of Fallen Timbers In 1791, Washington learned that an American force had been defeated by a Native American uprising in the Northwest Territory (present-day Ohio) that killed over 600 American soldiers and militia. The President ordered the Revolutionary War veteran General "Mad" Anthony Wayne to launch a new expedition against a coalition of tribes led by Miami Chief Little Turtle. Wayne spent months training his troops to fight using forest warfare in the style of the Indians before marching boldly into the region. After constructing a chain of forts, Wayne and his troops crushed the Indians in the Battle of Fallen Timbers (near present-day Toledo) in the summer of 1794. Defeated, the seven tribes—the Shawnee, Miami, Ottawa, Chippewa, Iroquois, Sauk, and Fox—ceded large portions of Indian lands to the United States and then moved west.

#### Debts and Finances The young country had severe financial problems. There were both domestic and foreign debts from the war, and the issue of how to raise revenue for government was hotly debated. Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton laid plans for governmental financing via tariffs, or surcharges on imported goods, and a tax on liquor. Much of this revenue was earmarked for retiring war debts. Hamilton also proposed a national bank to centralize the nation's financial base and urged the new government to assist in developing a manufacturing sector of the economy. He traded his support for Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson's plan to locate the nation's permanent capital near Virginia, with Philadelphia serving as a temporary capital, for Jefferson's support of his policies on retiring the debt.

By the midpoint of Washington's first term, however, such cooperation had deteriorated. Washington's administration had split into two rival factions: one headed by Jefferson, which would later become the Democratic-Republican Party, and the Federalist faction headed by Hamilton. They disagreed on virtually all aspects of domestic and foreign policy, and much of the President's energies were spent in mediating their differences.

#### War Over Whiskey A tax on whiskey—production of which had increased dramatically in the 1790s—was one of the key elements of Hamilton's fiscal program. This taxation enraged many citizens, and in 1794, resistance to the whiskey tax boiled over in western Pennsylvania with attacks on tax collectors and the formation of several well-armed resistance movements. Washington was alarmed by the Whiskey Rebellion, viewing it as a threat to the nation's existence. In an extraordinary move designed to demonstrate the federal government's preeminence and power, the President ordered militia from several other states into Pennsylvania to keep order. He then traveled to the site of the troubles to personally oversee the buildup of troops and to lend his encouragement to the enterprise. The insurrection collapsed quickly with little violence, and the resistance movements disbanded. Later, Washington pardoned the men convicted of treason in the matter.

Soon after this incident, however, a pair of high-level departures diminished the quality of the Washington administration. Secretary of War Henry Knox quit in December 1794, and Secretary of Treasury Alexander Hamilton followed suit a month later.

#### Transfer of Power Although it was his for the taking, Washington never considered running for a third term. Over four decades of public service had left him exhausted physically, mentally, and financially. He happily handed the office to his successor, John Adams. With customary care, Washington was scrupulously silent on his opinions of the men jockeying to succeed him. By ceding office after two terms, Washington helped ensure a regular and orderly transfer of executive power. His two-term limit set a custom that would stand for a century and a half, until Franklin Roosevelt was elected to a third term in 1940 and a fourth term in 1944.

Washington closed his administration with a thoughtful farewell address. Written with the help of Hamilton and Madison, the address urged Americans to be a vigilant and righteous people. "It is of infinite moment that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national union to your collective and individual happiness," he said. "The very idea of the power and the right of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government." It was as if he saw the great challenges to come in the next decades and begged his fellow citizens to remain a unified nation. But some of Washington's advice was not heeded. He warned his fellow citizens against "the baneful spirit of faction," referring to the party spirit that had disrupted his administration, and he warned against "foreign entanglements." But he could not prevent the formation of parties, nor did his warning against "foreign entanglements" prevent his successors from engaging in active diplomacy with European nations, often leading to de facto alliances. To this day, Washington's farewell address is read aloud every year in the U.S. Senate as a tribute to his service and foresight.

**What did Washington do during his life that would impact the United States of America? Summarize in a 5-7 sentence paragraph.**

**George Washington: Foreign Affairs**

Upon becoming President of the United States, George Washington almost immediately set two critical foreign policy precedents: He assumed control of treaty negotiations with a hostile power—in this case, the Creek Nation of Native Americans—and then asked for congressional approval once they were finalized. In addition, he sent American emissaries overseas for negotiations without legislative approval.

#### Taking a Global Position In 1789, the French Revolution sent shock waves across the Atlantic. Many Americans, mindful of French aid during their own struggle for independence, supported returning the favor. At the same time, the British were once again inciting Native Americans to attack settlers in the West, hoping to destabilize the fledgling Republic. American anger in response to these attacks served to reinforce sentiments for aiding France in any conflict with Great Britain. Washington was leery of any such foreign entanglement, considering his country too weak and unstable to fight another war with a major European power. His insistence on neutrality in foreign quarrels set another key precedent, as did his insistence that the power to make such a determination be lodged in the presidency.

Within days of Washington's second inauguration, France declared war on a host of European nations, England among them. Controversy over American involvement in the dispute redoubled. The Jefferson and Hamilton factions fought endlessly over the matter. The French ambassador to the U.S.—the charismatic, audacious "Citizen" Edmond Genet—had meanwhile been appearing nationwide, drumming up considerable support for the French cause. Washington was deeply irritated by this subversive meddling, and when Genet allowed a French-sponsored warship to sail out of Philadelphia against direct presidential orders, Washington demanded that France recall Genet.

#### More British Challenges In mid-1793, Britain announced that it would seize any ships trading with the French, including those flying the American flag. In protest, widespread civil disorder erupted in several American cities. By the following year, tensions with Britain were so high that Washington had to stop all American shipments overseas. Six large warships were commissioned; among them was the USS Constitution, the legendary "Old Ironsides." An envoy was sent to England to attempt reconciliation, but the British were now building a fortress in Ohio while increasing insurgent activities elsewhere in America.

The President's strong inclination in response to British provocations was to seek a diplomatic solution. But the envoy to England, John Jay, negotiated a weak treaty that undermined freedom of trade on the high seas and failed to compensate Americans for slaves taken by the British during the Revolution. Worst of all, the treaty did not address the then-common British practice of impressment. Congress approved the treaty with the proviso that trade barriers imposed by England be lessened. Washington, while dissatisfied with elements of the treaty, signed it nonetheless.

For the first time, members of the government openly criticized Washington. While this no doubt led to some hard feelings, it was also a milestone. The fledgling government chose partisan sides, verbally jousted with their President, everyone was heard, the public hurled angry rhetoric—and the government remained standing. It was the first example of the partisan give-and-take that has been essential to the survival of American democracy for over two centuries.

There was a single dreadful casualty. Washington's advisers presented him with evidence that Edmund Randolph, Jefferson's successor as secretary of state, had allegedly solicited a bribe from a French envoy to oppose the treaty with England. Although Randolph denied the charges, an angry Washington forced his old friend to resign. With this action, another important precedent was set. The Constitution empowers the President to nominate his principal officers with the advice and consent of the Senate; it says nothing, however, about the chief executive's authority to dismiss appointees. With Washington's dismissal of Randolph, the administrative system of the federal government was firmly tied to the President. In total, Washington dismissed three foreign ministers, two consuls, eight collectors, and four surveyors of internal revenue—all without seeking the advice or approval of Congress.

#### Foreign Policy in the Final Years A pair of treaties—one with Algiers and another with Spain—dominated the later stages of Washington's foreign policy. Pirates from the Barbary region of North Africa were seizing American ships, kidnapping their crew members, and demanding ransom. These Barbary pirates forced a harsh treaty on the U.S. that demanded annual payments to the ruler of Algiers. It was, in short, a shakedown for protection money, and it hardened Washington's resolve to construct a viable navy. The ships built during his administration would prove to be instrumental in naval actions that ended disputes with Algiers in later administrations.

The agreement with Spain had a much happier outcome for Washington. Spanish-controlled Florida agreed to stop inciting Native American attacks on settlers. More importantly, Spain conceded unrestricted access of the entire Mississippi River to Americans, opening much of the Ohio River Valley for settlement and trade. Agricultural produce could now flow on flatboats down the Ohio and Cumberland Rivers to the Mississippi River and on to New Orleans and Europe.

John Jay's treaty with the British continued to have negative ramifications for the remainder of Washington's administration. France declared it in violation of agreements signed with America during the Revolution and claimed that it comprised an alliance with their enemy, Britain. By 1796, the French were harassing American ships and threatening the U.S. with punitive sanctions. Diplomacy did little to solve the problem, and in later years, American and French warships exchanged gunfire on several occasions.

A final precedent set by America's first President, while unpleasant for Washington, was beneficial to his nation. Newspapers sympathetic to the Jeffersonians, emboldened by the public controversy surrounding the treaty with England, became increasingly critical of Washington during his final two years in office. One called him "Saint Washington," another mockingly offered him a crown. To the President's considerable credit, he bore these attacks with dignity—not even responding to them publicly. Privately, he was deeply wounded by the attacks on his integrity, and toward the end of his life, he ceased to have any contact with Thomas Jefferson.

**What did Washington do during his life that would impact the United States of America? Summarize in a 5-7 sentence paragraph.**

**George Washington: Impact and Legacy**

Among George Washington's critics are those who wonder how the nation might have developed had he sided with Jefferson in the partisan debates that swirled all around him as President. By identifying himself with Hamilton, he actually furthered the partisanship he so vigorously denounced in his farewell speech to the nation. In the eyes of those historians who doubt his greatness, this is Washington's most significant failure as President.

He has also been criticized, along with other members of the founding generation, for his ownership of slaves. At one point, he expressed the sincere desire to see "a plan adopted for the abolition" of slavery, but he backed away from initiating such a plan by looking to legislative authority for its conception and execution. While he provided generously for his slaves in his will, he did not free them in his lifetime. Nevertheless, a year before his death he remarked to an acquaintance, "I can foresee that nothing but the rooting out of slavery can perpetuate the existence of our union."

#### Creating the Presidency

Except for these caveats, it is the substantial consensus among historians that Washington's tenure in office set the nation on a path that has endured now for over 200 years, longer than any other republic in history. He established precedents that would last for generations and did more to flesh out the skeleton of the presidential office than anyone could have expected or predicted. As one scholar has said, he "invented tradition as he went along." His actions, more than those of any other Founding Father, became a part of the "unwritten Constitution.

"Washington's reliance on department heads for advice, similar to his war council during the Revolution, set a precedent for including the cabinet as part of the President's office. Moreover, because Congress did not challenge his appointments or his removal of appointees, principally out of respect for him, the tradition was planted to allow the President to choose his or her own cabinet. By his actions and words, Washington also set the standard for two presidential terms, a practice that lasted until 1940. When John Jay resigned as chief justice of the Supreme Court, Washington selected his successor from outside the bench, disregarding seniority and thus allowing future Presidents to draw from a diverse pool of talent beyond the Court's aging incumbents.

When the House of Representatives sought records related to negotiations surrounding the Jay Treaty of 1795, Washington refused to deliver all the documents. In doing so, he set the precedent for invoking what became known as executive privilege. In leading federal troops against the Whiskey Rebellion, Washington presented a clear show of federal authority, established the principle that federal law is the supreme law of the land, and demonstrated that the federal government is empowered to levy and collect taxes.

Although he sponsored and supported legislative proposals submitted to Congress for enactment, he carefully avoided trying to dictate or unduly influence the judicial and legislative branches of the government. In not vetoing bills with which he disagreed unless there were constitutional questions, he set a precedent of executive restraint that would be followed by the next five Presidents. Moreover, by keeping Vice President Adams at arm's length—not even inviting him to attend cabinet meetings—Washington set the tradition by which the vice president's role is largely ceremonial.

Also, although Washington hated partisanship and political parties, he tolerated dissent, vicious attacks on his reputation and name, and a divisive press—all in the interest of freedom. There is little reason to suggest that Washington, unlike so many of his successors, ever sought to use his office for personal empowerment or gain. Neither did he shelter his friends for the sake of their friendships when conflicts of interest arose.

**Creating the Supreme Court**

The Judiciary Act of 1789 is passed by Congress and signed by President George Washington, establishing the Supreme Court of the United States as a tribunal made up of six justices who were to serve on the court until death or retirement. That day, President Washington nominated John Jay to preside as chief justice, and John Rutledge, William Cushing, John Blair, Robert Harrison, and James Wilson to be associate justices. On September 26, all six appointments were confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

The U.S. Supreme Court was established by Article 3 of the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution granted the Supreme Court ultimate jurisdiction over all laws, especially those in which their constitutionality was at issue. The high court was also designated to oversee cases concerning treaties of the United States, foreign diplomats, admiralty practice, and maritime jurisdiction. On February 1, 1790, the first session of the U.S. Supreme Court was held in New York City’s Royal Exchange Building.

The U.S. Supreme Court grew into the most important judicial body in the world in terms of its central place in the American political order. According to the Constitution, the size of the court is set by Congress, and the number of justices varied during the 19th century before stabilizing in 1869 at nine. In times of constitutional crisis, the nation’s highest court has always played a definitive role in resolving, for better or worse, the great issues of the time.

Perhaps most importantly, Washington's presidential restraint, solemnity, judiciousness, and nonpartisan stance created an image of presidential greatness, or dignity, that dominates the office even today. He was the man who could have been a king but refused a crown and saved a republic.

**What did Washington do during his life that would impact the United States of America? Summarize in a 5-7 sentence paragraph.**

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| --- | --- |
| **Precedent set by George Washington** | **Action** |
| President is independent in dealing with foreign affairs. |  |
| President can send emissaries overseas for negotiations |  |
| President is Commander-in-Chief |  |
| Strong and cautious central government |  |
| Peaceful transfer of power |  |
| Inaugural Address |  |
| Separation of executive and legislative branches |  |
| Supreme Court appointments |  |
| Federal government is supreme power |  |
| Two-term limit as president |  |
| Power to dismiss federal employees |  |
| President chooses cabinet members |  |
| Executive privilege |  |
| Not unduly influencing the judicial and legislative branches of government |  |
| Executive Restraint |  |
| Role of Vice President |  |
| Image of presidential greatness and dignity |  |
| Helps Create the Supreme Court |  |

Write an Assertion (intro) paragraph, keeping in mind what you need to work on to move up or maintain your writing level. (hint, follow the C-A-T).

**Prompt: George Washington had a major impact on the government of the United States of America. Was this impact more positive or more negative? Explain, citing specific historic examples.**