

["America's Fabric" #8
George Washington: Unity
February 24, 2008]

Good morning, and welcome to "America's Fabric" a weekly radio program devoted to encouraging patriotism. I'm John McElroy, your host for "America's Fabric." Our subject this morning is an American whose life exemplifies love of country if anyone's ever did.

Last Sunday we honored Abraham Lincoln, the president whose resistance to the forces of disunion preserved our nation. Lincoln bore the burden of that responsibility for four long years before an assassin's bullet struck him down. George Washington was America's principal leader four times longer than that: from 1775, when Congress elected him Command-in-Chief of the military forces of the United States, until 1797, when he relinquished the presidency of the United States.

Without Lincoln, the War Between the States—the Civil War, as we now term it—would have been lost, and the United States of America and its great experiment in self-government destroyed. Without Washington, the War for Independence—the American Revolution as we usually call it now—which brought the United States of America into being and the start of the experiment, would never have happened.

Abraham Lincoln and George Washington both experienced defeats, and refused to yield to them. As Commander-in-Chief, Washington lost more battles than he won, but his persistence and dedication kept the American army intact and won the final victory. While it would be absurd to imply that he alone was responsible for winning the

war, it is only simple justice to his memory to say that his service was indispensable to the victory, which it required eight years to achieve.

The confidence in Washington's integrity by a majority of the Congress, the trust his fellow officers reposed in his judgment and steadfastness, and the love he inspired among the common soldiers of the army were vital to America's struggle for independence; just as his election to preside over the Convention that wrote the Constitution of the United States was essential to producing that vital instrument of American unity from a welter of seemingly irreconcilable, contending interests. Similarly, Washington's prudence, leadership, and wise conduct as the first president under the Constitution established the necessary respect for the Constitution as America's supreme law. The importance of his example is clearly evident in the fact that his voluntary withdrawal from the nation's most powerful political office, at the end of his second term as president, became a precedent that had for the American people the force of constitutional law for more than seven generations after his death in 1799.

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A tall, well-proportioned, muscular man, standing six feet two inches in his stockings, George Washington was a physically imposing figure. But it was his towering moral character that gained him the respect that made him the chief of that extraordinary band of American leaders known as the Founding Fathers.

His election to be Commander-in-Chief of the American army was unanimous. His election to preside over the convention that wrote the Constitution of the United States was unanimous. And *twice* he was elected to the presidency of the United States

by unanimous votes of the Electoral College—no other American president has ever been unanimously elected even once.

Catherine Drinker Bowen who chronicled the contentious disputes involved in the writing of the Constitution, in a book appropriately titled Miracle at Philadelphia, had this to say about Washington's contribution: "His presence kept the Federal Convention together, kept it going, just as his presence had kept a straggling, ill-conditioned army together throughout the terrible years of [the War for Independence]." That is the simple truth, and we should never forget it.

As James Flexner shows in his biography of George Washington, Washington: The Indispensable Man: the birth of America would have been impossible without George Washington—which is why he was called the Father of his Country.

Steadiness and fortitude in the face of defeat and perseverance in the face of enormous difficulties were perhaps the leading traits of Washington's character; selflessness and forbearance were others. Self-control and dignity of bearing, a trait his contemporaries often mention, were other qualities of his character. His most important characteristic, however, was his indomitable belief in the rightness of American freedom. The virtues foremost in the thinking of George Washington may best be summarized in the words "Duty, Honor, Country," the motto of the corps of cadets at West Point.

From the age of 21, when the colonial governor of Virginia commissioned him to carry out a dangerous mission, until his retirement from the highest elective office in the United States, forty-five years later, faithful public service was the distinguishing feature of his life.

And in serving his country—rather than his own personal interests and inclinations—he seemed to enjoy an almost providential protection. In one battle, he had two horses shot out from under him, and when the engagement ended, four bullet holes were discovered in the coat he wore. Strangely enough, he died suddenly at age 67 after only one day of sickness during the second year of his final retirement from public office.

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Born into the minor, landed gentry of tidewater Virginia on February 22, 1732, Washington was the first child of his father's second marriage. His childhood was spent in comfortable, though not luxurious surroundings. His schooling was mostly, it appears, at home under the tutelage of his father, Augustine Washington, and his half-brother Lawrence, who was fourteen years his senior. The emphasis of this instruction was on practical matters such as mathematics, surveying, and draftsmanship, for which he showed an early natural talent. The death of his father when Washington was eleven, which occasioned some decline in the family's fortunes, precluded any thought of going to college. The accounts of purchases he meticulously kept in his early manhood indicate that his reading ran mostly to books on history, biography, military affairs, and agriculture.

In his twenties, he spent years on the frontier as a surveyor and as commander of Virginia's militia defending settlers from Indian attacks. His first publication, a book which drew attention in Europe as well as America, was the journal he kept of his travels in the trans-Appalachian wilderness of Virginian and western Pennsylvania during the winter of 1753-1754. In 1770, on his final trip into the wilderness of the Ohio country, he shot and ate buffalo, and formed the idea that these wonderful American animals

might be domesticated and bred as a source of flavorful meat. He tried the experiment, and when he died a buffalo cow was among his livestock at Mount Vernon. George Washington was an earnest, forward-looking agriculturalist who was never more content than when engaged in hands-on improvement of his farming operations.

Washington enjoyed the diversions of the gentry of Virginia in his day: attending horse races, balls, and the theater and exchanging visits with his neighbors. An athletic outdoorsman and superb horseman, he was fond of fox hunting, and loved fishing.

He married in his twenty-seventh year Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy Virginia widow his own age, who had a small son and daughter. He and his wife never conceived a child of their own.

Two years after marrying, he inherited his brother Lawrence's estate, "Mount Vernon," in northern Virginia, overlooking the Potomac River, and his wife's fortune—an inheritance from her deceased husband of roughly \$100,000: an immense sum of money in 1761—allowed him to enlarge the manor house at Mount Vernon and expand the estate's landholdings to 4,000 acres.

Washington knew his greatest happiness in the period following his marriage, before the war with Britain. During that decade and a half, he found satisfaction as a farmer and in the social activities as an affluent Virginia gentleman. Repeatedly elected to the Virginia legislature, he was also able in those years to indulge his fondness for the theatre and dancing while attending legislative sessions in the colonial capital at Williamsburg.

When war with Britain began, he immediately and forthrightly espoused the American cause; thus putting his great wealth, as well as his life, at risk.

As Commander-in-Chief, Washington's first military action, expelling the British from Boston, in a nearly bloodless siege, was a great success. In defending the other principal cities in the North, New York and Philadelphia, however, he was not successful, and both fell into British hands. But Washington's brilliantly conceived and executed counterattacks at Trenton and Princeton in the dead of winter and his rousing victory in the battle at Monmouth, New Jersey, the following summer forced the British to abandon Philadelphia, evacuate New Jersey, and retreat into their island stronghold of Manhattan, where the British navy offered complete security. While Washington was chasing the British from Pennsylvania and New Jersey, General Horatio Gates delivered a further blow to George the Third's attempt to put down the revolt of his American subjects against royal government by capturing an entire British army at the Battle of Saratoga.

Following these American triumphs in the North, the British shifted the main theater of their military operations after 1778 to the South, where they had won significant victories by taking the coastal cities of Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina. In other battles in the interior of the country, however, they met with defeat, and the American generals Nathaniel Greene and Dan Morgan lured and drove the army commanded by General Lord Cornwallis northward onto the Yorktown peninsula of Virginia. In this development Washington saw his grand opportunity to deliver the final blow to Britain's failing strategies, and in a series of complicated, coordinated moves concentrated his army, and that of his recently acquired French allies, at Yorktown. With the help of a French fleet, which prevented reinforcements from reaching Lord Cornwallis and also brought siege cannons to the Franco-American forces, Washington mounted a three-week siege that forced the surrender of yet another British

army. Negotiations to end the war soon followed, and a treaty of peace between Great Britain and the United States of America, recognizing the independence of the latter, was signed in Europe on the third of September, 1783.

Within a few years of resigning his commission as Commander-in-Chief and returning to life at Mount Vernon, Washington's leadership was again called upon to create a stronger national government capable of defending America's independence: now the world's oldest republican government based on a constitution written and ratified by elected assemblies of the people's representatives.

Washington took the presidential oath of office required by the new constitution—"I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States"—on April 30, 1789. He had neither sought nor desired the office. But when it became clear to him that he was the overwhelming choice of his countrymen to be the chief executive in their new government, his sense of duty again compelled him to act contrary to his desire for retirement.

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In the closing months of his presidency, George Washington prepared a "Farewell Address" to the nation he loved and had so dutifully served. In this remarkable essay, based, he said, on his long experience in public life, he set forth fundamental principles that would, in his judgment, assure the United States peace, prosperity, and future greatness.

The “Farewell Address” was published September 19, 1796 in The American Daily Advertiser, a newspaper of Philadelphia, which was then the nation’s capital, and from there it spread to other newspapers in America and periodicals in Europe.

Washington began the essay by announcing that he would not accept election to a third term as president, giving as his reasons “the increasing weight of years” and a lingering doubt about (quote) “my qualifications” for the office.

In addressing his fellow citizens, he said they needed no advice from him to strengthen their “love of liberty.” What was necessary was to remind them that in their unity as a people they had a “support of your tranquility at home, [of] your peace abroad, of your safety, of your prosperity, of that very liberty which you so highly prize.” This was Washington’s foremost theme in his Farewell to his fellow Americans: maintain your national unity. Washington advised his fellow Americans that “designing men” would employ “many artifices” to diminish “in your minds [the need for union]. ... [I]nternal and external enemies will be constantly and actively (though often covertly and insidiously)” aiming to weaken American unity.

The power to disrupt and divide lay, he observed, in the temptation to let special interests take precedent over the general welfare of the nation, which was in the best interest of every American. “Your union ought to be considered,” he advised, “the main prop of your liberty, and ... the love of the one ought to endear to you the preservation of the other.... Distrust the patriotism of those who ... endeavor to weaken” the sentiment of unity among Americans.

The Constitution was, Washington said, fundamental to that unity, and he urged every American to respect and obey it, because the basis of the American system of

government, both in the states and the federal union, was, he said: “the right of the people to make and to alter their constitutions of government,” a right that “presupposes the duty of every individual to obey ... the government” which the will of the people establishes. He warned Americans to remember that the Constitution should not be changed upon “mere hypothesis,” which would lead to “perpetual change, from the endless variety of hypothesis and opinion.” He urged particular vigilance in regard to the tendency to “consolidate [into one department of government] the powers” that the Constitution had separated: “If in the opinion of the people the distribution or modification of the constitutional powers be in any particular wrong, let it be corrected by an amendment in the way which the Constitution designates. But let there be no change by usurpation; for though this in one instance may be the instrument of good, it is the customary weapon by which free governments are destroyed.”

Washington also warned of “the baneful effects of the spirit of party” factions, which tend to agitate society with “false alarms,” kindle “animosity,” foment occasional “riot and insurrection,” and “open the door to foreign influences and corruption.” He said that though the spirit of partisan politics was “inseparable from [human] nature,” in governments that are “purely elective,” such as in the United States, “party passion” poses “a constant danger” which the “force of public opinion” ought to discourage.

He also emphasized that every “sincere friend” of free government should acknowledge the need for “virtue or morality,” and recognize the role that religion has in supporting morality. Anyone claiming to be a patriot, Washington said, should never “subvert these great pillars of human happiness [morality and religion]—these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens.” Similarly, because popular government gives

“force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened”; therefore, whoever claims to be an American patriot ought also to encourage an increase of knowledge as well as morality. For the “fabric” of a free government is the morality and knowledge of its citizens.

Washington also counseled the national government not to borrow money and to use public credit “as sparingly as possible, [while avoiding] the accumulation of debt, not only by shunning occasions of expense, but by vigorous exertions in time of peace to discharge the debts [incurred through] unavoidable wars,” and “not ungenerously [throw] upon posterity the burthen which we ourselves ought to bear.”

With regard to foreign relations, Washington had this advice: “Cultivate peace and harmony with all [nations]....nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations and passionate attachment for others should be excluded ... [T]he nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave.... to its animosity or its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.” He added to this advice the following, equally strong admonition : “Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens) ... a free people ought to be *constantly* awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government.”

Washington ended his Farewell by saying that in leaving government service after holding public commissions and offices for forty-five years in his native Virginia and the United States, he looked forward to “the sweet enjoyment” of “good laws under a free

government—the ever-favorite object of my heart and the happy reward ... of our mutual cares, labors, and dangers.”

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This is John McElroy, your host for “America’s Fabric,” saying thanks for listening and asking you to tell your friends and family to become listeners. I want to thank all of you who think as I do, that it is important to encourage patriotism today, for your generous response to my appeals for financial support. Without your help, it would not be possible to pay for the air time to broadcast “America’s Fabric.”

The address to which donations may be sent will be given in a moment by our announcer.

Audio of all of the programs of “America’s Fabric” may be heard by visiting our website americasfabric.com and clicking on “Archives.”

Until next Sunday: stay proud—and grateful—to be an American. And remember: America is the land of the free because it is the home of the brave.