

Introduction

He changed mankind's ideas of political greatness.

Attributed to Fisher Ames

George Washington is the single most important figure among the American Founders and perhaps the single most important statesman in all of America's history. As such, his career has been studied extensively by scholars and is well known to a wide audience. Most educated Americans can recite Washington's most famous contributions to the establishment of the nation's independent constitutional republic, for which the people of his generation dubbed him the "father of his country": his role as commander-in-chief of the revolutionary army, his celebrated decision to shun power and return to private life after independence was won, his reemergence from retirement to preside over the drafting of the Constitution in the summer of 1787, and his service as president during the critical first two terms, during which the new government was put into operation and placed on a stable footing.

Washington has been somewhat neglected, however, as a political thinker. Multitudes of books and articles have been published on the political thought of men such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin. There is no comparable body of work on Washington's political thought. This is certainly understandable in a way. Unlike many of his great contemporaries, Washington was not a trained lawyer and was not the beneficiary of the liberal education offered by the various colonial colleges that existed in his day. Nor was he a prodigy of wide-ranging and profound self-education like Franklin. In general, Washington had a much less theoretical cast of mind than any of these figures. He was much more thoroughly a man of action.

Nevertheless, taking the more theoretical Founders seriously as political thinkers points us back in the direction of the careful study of Washington's political thought. For the most theoretically accomplished of the Founders joined with the ordinary people of their generation in regarding Washington as the greatest man of their time – indeed, as one of the greatest men of all time. If we accept the well-established consensus that men like Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Adams, and Franklin made contributions to political reflection that are of enduring consequence, then it must follow that the political man to whom *they* looked up

with admiration as their superior is worthy of our serious attention. For those of us who could not know him at first hand, however, his greatness can only be experienced fully through a consideration of his political writings.

We encounter in Washington's political writings not the theoretical greatness we find in the other leading Founders, but something that is nevertheless a genuine greatness of mind. Indeed, Washington is probably the clearest American example of something like Aristotle's *megalopsuchos*, the magnanimous or great-souled man, who claims the highest honors and responsibilities and is in fact worthy of them. This greatness of mind or soul is not only morally edifying but also intellectually instructive because of its subtlety and complexity. In comparison to the more philosophically inclined Founders, Washington was a simpler man – but he was never simple-minded. On the contrary, his political writings reveal a remarkable and beautiful wholeness and balance of soul, a mind capable of accommodating and giving due credit to the various competing goods that are essential to a just political order – and to a just life of political action. We encounter in Washington's political writings an unwavering patriotism (of course), but also a willingness to confront the country's defects candidly, to acknowledge the just claims of other countries, and even (occasionally) to entertain cosmopolitan dreams of universal brotherhood. We find a man who objected to the abuses of British power not only as a threat to individual rights but also as an insult to American honor – a man who combined modern Lockean individualism with a kind of traditional nationalism. We find an absolute commitment to maintaining high standards of personal and political conduct, while still recognizing and sympathizing with the numerous moral frailties to which human beings are subject. And throughout we find an astute and even cunning judge of political situations and political actors, always assessing them on the basis of a sober and realistic appreciation of human nature.

We have selected and edited this two-volume collection of Washington's political writings in order to encourage greater interest in and study of his political thought and statesmanship. The work is, indeed, part of a much larger project. It is the second title in Cambridge University Press's the Political Writings of American Statesmen (Bradford P. Wilson and Carson Holloway, series editors), which was inaugurated in 2017 with the publication of *The Political Writings of Alexander Hamilton*.

We certainly recognize and are grateful for the earlier collections of Washington's writings. We nevertheless think that the present work makes a unique contribution by being more comprehensive than some of the earlier works and more focused than others. In the last part of the previous century, William B. Allen published *George Washington: A Collection* (Liberty Fund) and John Rhodehamel published *George Washington: Writings* (Library of America). Although they are excellent introductions to Washington's mind, their status as one-volume works necessarily limits their range of coverage. Moreover, Rhodehamel's Library of America volume includes a great deal of Washington's personal correspondence and therefore necessarily omits much that is of primarily political interest. In contrast to these limited collections

stand the various past efforts to bring out a complete collection of Washington's papers, most notably John C. Fitzpatrick's *The Writings of George Washington* (published by the George Washington Bicentennial Commission) and the University Press of Virginia's massive and comprehensive *The Papers of George Washington*. These latter works will remain essential tools for scholarly specialists, but they are so sprawling that they cannot offer the convenience of the present work. Moreover, by compiling everything that Washington wrote, they necessarily include a vast number of documents that are of little interest to the student of politics. In contrast to these earlier works, we have tried to include all of Washington's writings that are of enduring political interest but, at the same time, *only* what is of enduring political interest. We aim, by collecting these materials together in a single two-volume work, to encourage more students of political theory and statecraft to turn their attention to Washington's thought.

In trying to include everything that is of *enduring* political interest, we have necessarily chosen to exclude writings that, while political, are so mundane as to be of no interest to the student of statecraft or political thought. Washington wrote so many political documents that it would be impossible to include all of them while keeping the compilation to a manageable size (to say nothing of keeping it thoroughly interesting to contemporary readers). Our primary rule of selection has been to include whatever touches on matters of principle and its application to practice, as well as whatever gives an account and Washington's evaluation of the pivotal moments in the Founding of the nation. Put another way, we have tried to include all political writings that truly reveal Washington's mind and character. Accordingly, we have excluded the multitude of Washington's writings that were merely necessary to the execution of his administrative duties as commander-in-chief and as president.

The Political Writings of George Washington is arranged chronologically into two volumes, and each volume is further divided into parts that correspond to the main periods of Washington's public life. Volume II, the present volume, is divided into three parts that trace the second half of Washington's public career. Part I: First Presidential Term: 1788–1793 presents writings from Washington's first term as president of the United States. Here readers may accompany Washington as he navigates the challenges of holding the supreme executive office of a new government for the newly independent nation. We find him considering with care what standards of dignity and decorum are appropriate for the highest office in a republican government. We find him weighing what factors should govern appointments to the subordinate offices at his disposal, as well as judging the proper scope of the powers of the presidency and the government of the Union. Finally, we here encounter Washington exercising diplomacy not only toward other nations, but also toward the various members of his talented but fractious cabinet – and also seeking that cabinet's advice about whether he should serve a second term.

Part II: Second Presidential Term: 1793–1797 collects writings from Washington's second term as president of the United States. During this period Washington had to grapple with delicate problems of foreign policy – especially

the question of how the young and comparatively weak America should stand in relation to the warring great powers, Britain and France. This challenging term presented domestic perplexities as well, most especially the so-called Whiskey Rebellion, which Washington believed to be a serious threat to the new government's authority. Moreover, throughout Washington's entire presidency we find many ceremonial communications in which he strove to educate his fellow citizens in the basic principles of republican government and in the habits and virtues necessary for it to survive and thrive.

Part III: Retirement: 1797–1799 covers the years of Washington's brief final withdrawal from public life. As is well known, he hoped at last to find relief from the mental strain that had almost constantly accompanied him through many years of consequential, perplexing, and often perilous public service. This hope was not, however, perfectly realized. Even in retirement Washington continued to follow politics closely, forming and expressing opinions on the events of the day, worrying about the dangers of party spirit at home and war abroad. The latter concern drew him one last time into a position of official responsibility: he accepted when President John Adams appointed him commander-in-chief of the provisional army that was planned in the event of open war with France.

The volume concludes with an appendix, "Washington's Death and Legacy." This section includes some firsthand accounts of Washington's last hours, as well as some appreciations of his life, character, and career offered by other Founding-era figures – both American and European – who had known him or followed his career. The appendix also includes retrospective commentaries on Washington's significance by Abraham Lincoln and Calvin Coolidge.

Throughout the work we have made light modifications to Washington's original texts in order to make them more accessible to contemporary readers. Probably our greatest intervention has been to modernize Washington's punctuation. In general, his punctuation is often difficult to follow, partly because the conventions of his day were different from those of our own, but also partly because his command of those conventions was less certain than that of his more formally educated peers. Our aim in modernizing the punctuation has always been to preserve Washington's meaning while at the same time rendering it more immediately evident to the modern reader. Put another way, we have tried to save readers the mental effort of "translating" Washington's punctuation, so that their minds may instead be occupied wholly with following the train of Washington's thought and appreciating the vigor, clarity, and dignity of his expression.

We have also modernized Washington's spelling and capitalization, although we have left the latter undisturbed when he capitalized a whole word with the intention of emphasizing it. Likewise, italics are retained for words that Washington chose to emphasize. We have also preserved Washington's capitalizations in his references to God and Providence. We have generally filled in words that Washington abbreviated and ones (usually names) left partly incomplete (such as Mr. H— — for Mr. Hamilton or C— — for Congress). In addition, we have modernized Washington's uses of "a" and "an" and have

corrected errors in subject–verb agreements. Otherwise, where we have changed or added words – either as a correction of Washington himself, to reflect his obvious intention, or as a correction of a transcription error – we have indicated as much in an endnote.

We consulted John C. Fitzpatrick’s *The Writings of George Washington* and the University of Virginia’s *The Papers of George Washington* in supplying missing letters from obviously incomplete words and in supplying missing or illegible words. Occasional blank spaces in the text are Washington’s own.



Fig. 1 Part I: First Presidential Term: 1788–1793
Public Domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Washington%27s_Inauguration.jpg

PART I

First Presidential Term:
1788–1793

To Alexander Hamilton, October 3, 1788

Dear Sir,

In acknowledging the receipt of your candid and kind letter by the last post, little more is incumbent upon me than to thank you sincerely for the frankness with which you communicated your sentiments, and to assure you that the same manly tone of intercourse will always be more than barely welcome. Indeed, it will be highly acceptable to me. I am particularly glad, in the present instance, you have dealt thus freely and like a friend. Although I could not help observing from several publications and letters that my name had been sometimes spoken of, and that it was possible the contingency which is the subject of your letter might happen, yet I thought it best to maintain a guarded silence and to lack the *counsel* of my best friends (which I certainly hold in the highest estimation) rather than to hazard an imputation unfriendly to the delicacy of my feelings. For, situated as I am, I could hardly bring the question into the slightest discussion, or ask an opinion even in the most confidential manner, without betraying, in my judgment, some impropriety of conduct, or without feeling an apprehension that a premature display of anxiety might be construed into a vainglorious desire of pushing myself into notice as a candidate. Now, if I am not grossly deceived in myself, I should unfeignedly rejoice in case the electors, by giving their votes in favor of some other person, would save me from the dreaded dilemma of being forced to accept or refuse. If that may not be, I am, in the next place, earnestly desirous of searching out the truth and of knowing whether there does not exist a probability that the government would be just as happily and effectually carried into execution without my aid as with it. I am truly solicitous to obtain all the previous information which the circumstances will afford, and to determine (when the determination can with propriety be no longer postponed) according to the principles of right reason and the dictates of a clear conscience, without too great a reference to the unforeseen consequences which may affect my person or reputation. Until that period, I may fairly hold myself open to conviction, though I allow your sentiments to have weight in them; and I shall not pass by your arguments without giving them as dispassionate a consideration as I can possibly bestow upon them.

In taking a survey of the subject in whatever point of light I have been able to place it, I will not suppress the acknowledgment, my dear sir, that I have

always felt a kind of gloom upon my mind as often as I have been taught to expect I might, and perhaps must, ere long be called to make a decision. You will, I am well assured, believe the assertion (though I have little expectation it would gain credit from those who are less acquainted with me) that if I should receive the appointment, and if I should be prevailed upon to accept it, the acceptance would be attended with more diffidence and reluctance than ever I experienced before in my life. It would be, however, with a fixed and sole determination of lending whatever assistance might be in my power to promote the public weal, in hopes that at a convenient and an early period my services might be dispensed with, and that I might be permitted once more to retire, to pass an unclouded evening, after the stormy day of life, in the bosom of domestic tranquility. But why these anticipations? If the friends to the Constitution conceive that my administering the government will be a means of its acceleration and strength, is it not probable that the adversaries of it may entertain the same ideas, and of course make it an object of opposition? That many of this description will become electors I can have no doubt of, any more than that their opinion will extend to any character who (from whatever cause) would be likely to thwart their measures. It might be impolite in them to make this declaration *previous* to the election, but I shall be out in my conjectures if they do not act conformably thereto—and from that, the seeming moderation by which they appear to be actuated at present is neither more nor less than a finesse to lull and deceive. Their plan of opposition is systemized, and a regular intercourse, I have much reason to believe, between the leaders of it in the several states is formed to render it more effectual. With sentiments of sincere regard and esteem—I have, the honor to be &c.

Go: Washington

To Benjamin Lincoln, October 26, 1788

My Dear Sir,

I have been lately favored with the receipt of your letters of the 24th and 30th of September, with their enclosure, and thank you sincerely for your free and friendly communications.

As the period is now rapidly approaching which must decide the fate of the new Constitution as to the manner of its being carried into execution, and probably as to its usefulness, it is not wonderful that we should all feel an unusual degree of anxiety on the occasion. I must acknowledge my fears have been greatly alarmed, but still I am not without hopes. From the good beginning that has been made in Pennsylvania, a state from which much was to be feared, I cannot help foreboding well of the others. That is to say, I flatter myself a majority of them will appoint federal members to the several branches of the new government. I hardly should think that Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia would be for attempting premature amendments. Some of the rest may also in all probability be apprehensive of throwing our affairs into confusion by such ill-timed expedients. There will, however, be no room for the advocates of the Constitution to relax in their exertions; for if they should be lulled into security, appointments of Anti-Federal men may probably take place, and the consequences, which you so justly dread, be realized. Our assembly is now in session. It is represented to be rather Anti-Federal, but we have heard nothing of its doings. Mr. Patrick Henry, R. H. Lee, and Madison are talked of for the Senate. Perhaps as much opposition, or, in other words, as great an effort for early amendments, is to be apprehended from this state as from any but New York. The constant report is that North Carolina will soon accede to the new Union. A new assembly is just elected in Maryland, in which it is asserted the number of Federalists greatly predominates; and that being the case, we may look for favorable appointments, in spite of the rancor and activity of a few discontented, and I may say *apparently* unprincipled, men.

I would willingly pass over in silence that part of your letter in which you mention the persons who are candidates for the two first offices in the executive, if I did not fear the omission might seem to betray a want of confidence. Motives of delicacy have prevented me hitherto from conversing or writing on this subject, whenever I could avoid it with decency. I may, however, with