

WASHINGTON: SYMBOL OF THE REVOLUTION

The Second Congress faced the question of who should lead its army. John Hancock wanted the honor, but instead, eyes turned toward a tall, muscular man wearing a Virginia militia uniform. During his lifetime, eyes always seemed to turn toward George Washington.

It was almost as if his whole life prepared him for the role of leading an army, and later, a nation. The first Washington, John, came to Virginia in 1675, 57 years before the birth of his grandson, George. Augustine Washington (George's father) married twice; George was the first son of the second wife. Augustine hoped his sons would study in England, but he died when George was 11. Augustine was not wealthy, and the most important thing he left his son was the responsibility for the care of his mother and four brothers and sisters. As a boy he adopted 110 rules of conduct to live by. Two examples were: "Sleep not when others speak, sit not when others stand, speak not when you should hold your peace" and "Undertake not what you cannot perform but be careful to keep your promise."

George's half-brother, Lawrence, had the most impact on George's life. Lawrence served as an officer in an American unit during a war with Spain and had taken part in the capture of the West Indian fort of Cartagena. Lawrence taught his eager younger brother the manual of arms and excited his interest in serving in the king's army. George spent a short time in school and learned some Latin, but most of his education was outdoors. He was a skilled surveyor by the age of 14.

When he was 16, George went with a surveying expedition into frontier country. Surveying for others and buying land for himself took Washington out to the frontier many times and gave him an understanding of western affairs that few planters had. It also taught him how to survive a cold night's sleep under a bear blanket covered with lice and fleas.

Lawrence died when George was 20, and Washington inherited his estate at Mount Vernon. Running a plantation was like running a town; there were hired workers, overseers, and slaves to supervise. Washington was responsible for seeing that the community was well fed, clothed, and housed. He loved farming and noted that crops grew better in some soils on his land than others. He set up a crude laboratory to test his theories. Washington was a detail man, keeping careful notes and records.

In 1753 Washington was appointed major in the Virginia militia. Governor Dinwiddie sent him on the trips west that resulted in war with France. At Fort Necessity, Washington learned what it was like to be shot at. Washington went with Braddock's expedition as a volunteer, and he and the Virginia militia covered the retreat. Washington hoped his courage on that occasion would win him a high-ranking officer's position in the British army. It did not.



Although Washington did not want to be general in chief of the Continental Army, he proved to be an excellent commander during the trying years of the Revolution.

Instead, he faced the difficult task of protecting Virginia's long frontier with only a handful of men.

During the French and Indian War, he was often in the thick of battles, sometimes riding back and forth between the two armies. Horses were shot out from under him, but he somehow escaped being wounded. He appeared healthy, but at different times, was deathly ill. The British never gave him the respect he deserved or the officer's commission that he wanted.

In 1759 Washington resigned as colonel of the Virginia militia and happily returned to civilian life. He met and married Martha, the widow of Dan Custis. She had received a large part of the Custis estate, and between them, they owned 200 slaves. Washington considered slavery a poor way to get work done, but he did not sell his slaves. As a result, he had more than he needed. The Washingtons entertained many guests at Mt. Vernon and, when they could, went to the theater and dances at Williamsburg. Washington also enjoyed fox hunts and took great interest in his horses and hunting dogs.

By 1769 Washington's patience with England was wearing thin. He had grown to dislike English ways: the way he and other colonial officers had been treated as inferiors and personal irritation with the way his business agents in London were treating him. After attending the First Continental Congress, he left feeling that war was coming. As a delegate to the Second Congress, he wore his military uniform to indicate Virginia's willingness to fight if a war must be fought. Washington did not want to be the general in chief. But when the position was offered to him, he accepted.

There were certain characteristics that made Washington what James Flexner called: "the indispensable man." (1) He had the courage of his convictions. Once he decided something was right, he held to it. During the war, Congress often gave him very little support. A weaker man would have quit, and a stronger man would have seized power as dictator; Washington never considered either temptation.

(2) He learned from his mistakes. Like the rest of his army, he went through on-the-job training that included learning who was capable and who was not. Some officers came with imposing military records, but when he discovered they could not fight, they were cast aside. His own abilities grew as he fought the war. He developed an effective spy network that kept him well informed. He made mistakes but kept the respect of his best officers and enlisted men through "times that try men's souls" as Thomas Paine put it.

(3) He set examples for his troops. His eye for detail required that he dress properly, avoid too much friendliness with his officers and men, show no fear on the battlefield, remind the men at times why they were fighting, and most difficult for him, keep his temper under control.

Activity

Washington was almost idolized by Americans for many years after his death in 1799. How can individuals such as Washington change history? Did Washington become a hero because of great or small decisions? To what extent do famous people have an obligation to set an example?