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| When Congress, after the fights at Lexington and Concord, resolved that the colonies ought to be put in a position of defence, the first practical step was the unanimous selection (June 15) of Washington as commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the United Colonies. Refusing any salary and asking only the reimbursement of his expenses, he accepted the position, asking every gentleman in the room, however, to remember his declaration that he did not believe himself to be equal to the command, and that he accepted it only as a duty made imperative by the unanimity of the call.  He reiterated this belief in private letters even to his wife; and there seems to be no doubt that, to the day of his death, he was the most determined sceptic as to his fitness for the positions to which he was successively called. He was commissioned on the 17th of June 1775, set out at once for Cambridge, Mass., and on the 3rd of July took command of the levies there assembled for action against the British garrison in Boston. The battle of Bunker Hill had already taken place, news of it reaching him on the way north.  Until the following March, Washington's work was to bring about some semblance of military organization and discipline, to collect ammunition and military stores, to correspond with Congress and the colonial authorities, to guide military operations in widely separate parts of the country, to create a military system for a people entirely unaccustomed to such a thing and impatient and suspicious under it, and to bend the course of events steadily towards driving the British out of Boston. He planned the expeditions against Canada under Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold, and sent out privateers to harass British commerce. It is not easy to see how Washington survived the year 1775; the colonial poverty, the exasperating annoyances, the outspoken criticism of those who demanded active operations, the personal and party dissensions in Congress, the selfishness or stupidity which cropped out again and again among some of the most patriotic of his coadjutors were enough to have broken down most men. They completed his training. The change in this one winter is very evident. If he was not a great man when he went to Cambridge, he was both a general and a statesman in the fullest sense when he drove the British out of Boston in March 1776. From that time until his death he was admittedly the foremost man of the continent.  Washington's retreat through New Jersey; the manner in which he turned and struck his pursuers at Trenton and Princeton, and then established himself at Morristown, so as to make the way to Philadelphia impassable; the vigour with which he handled his army at Brandywine and Germantown; the persistence with which he held the strategic position of Valley Forge through the dreadful winter of 1777-1778, in spite of the misery of his men, the clamours of the people and the impotence and meddling of the fugitive Congress all went to show that the fibre of his public character had been hardened to its permanent quality. These are the times that try mens souls, wrote Thomas Paine at the beginning of 1776, and the words had added meaning in each year that followed; but Washington had no need to fear the test. The spirit which culminated in the treason of Benedict Arnold was a serious addition to his burdens; for what Arnold did others were almost ready to do. Many of the American officers, too, had taken offence at the close personal friendship which had sprung up between the marquis de La Fayette and Washington, and at the diplomatic deference which the commander-in-chief felt compelled to show to other foreign officers. Some of the foreign volunteers were eventually dismissed politely by Congress, on the ground that suitable employment could not be found for them. The name of one of them, Thomas Conway, an Irish soldier of fortune from the French service, is attached to what is called Conway's Cabal, a scheme for superseding Washington by General Horatio Gates, who in October 1777 succeeded in forcing Burgoyne to capitulate at Saratoga, and who had been persistent in his depreciation of the commander-in-chief and in intrigues with members of Congress. A number of officers, as well as of men in civil life, were mixed up in the plot, while the methods employed were the lowest forms of anonymous slander; but at the first breath of exposure every one concerned hurried to cover up his part in it, leaving Conway to shoulder both the responsibility and the disgrace. The treaty of alliance of 1778 with France, following the surrender of Burgoyne, put an end to all such plans. It was absurd to expect foreign nations to deal with a second-rate man as commander-in-chief while Washington was in the field, and he seems to have had no further trouble of this kind. The prompt and vigorous pursuit of Sir Henry Clinton across New Jersey towards New York, and the battle of Monmouth, in which the plan of battle was thwarted by Charles Lee, another foreign recruit of popular reputation, closed the military record of Washington, so far as active campaigning was concerned, until the end of the war. The British confined their operations to other parts of the continent, and Washington, alive as ever to the importance of keeping up connection with New England, devoted himself to watching the British in and about New York City. It was in every way fitting, however, that he who had been the mainspring of the war from the beginning, and had borne far more than his share of its burdens and discouragements, should end it with the campaign of Yorktown, conceived by himself, and the surrender of Cornwallis (October 1781). Although peace was not concluded until September 1783, there was no more important fighting. Washington retained his commission until the 23rd of December 1783, when, in a memorable scene, he returned it to Congress, then in session at Annapolis, Md., and retired to Mount Vernon. His expenses during the war, including secret service money, aggregated about $64,000; in addition he expended a considerable amount from his private fortune, for which he made no claim to reimbursement.  By this time the popular canonization of Washington had fairly begun. He occupied a position in American public life and in the American political system which no man could possibly hold again. He may be said to have become a political element quite apart from the Union, or the states, or the people of either. In a country in which newspapers had at best only a local circulation, and where communication was still slow and difficult, the knowledge that Washington favored anything superseded, with very many men, both argument and the necessity of information. His constant correspondence with the governors of the states gave him a quasi-paternal attitude towards government in general. On relinquishing his command, for example, he was able to do what no other man could have done with either propriety or safety: he addressed a circular letter to the governors, pointing out changes in the existing form of government which he believed to be necessary, and urging an indissoluble union of the states under one federal head, a regard to public justice, the adoption of a suitable military establishment for a time of peace, and the making of those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity. His refusal to accept a salary, either as commander-in-chief or as president, might have been taken as affectation or impertinence in any one else; it seemed natural and proper enough in the case of Washington, but it was his peculiar privilege. It is even possible that he might have had a crown, had he been willing to accept it. The army, at the end of the war, was justly dissatisfied with its treatment. The officers were called to meet at Newburgh, and it was the avowed purpose of the leaders of the movement to march the army westward, appropriate vacant public lands as part compensation for arrears of pay, leave Congress to negotiate for peace without an army, and mock at their calamity and laugh when their fear cometh. Less publicly avowed was the purpose to make their commander-in-chief king, if he could be persuaded to aid in establishing a monarchy. Washington put a summary stop to the whole proceeding. A letter written to him by Colonel Lewis Nicola, on behalf of this coterie, detailed the weakness of a republican form of government as they had experienced it, their desire for mixed government, with him at its head, and their belief that the title of king would be objectionable to but few and of material advantage to the country. His reply was peremptory and indignant. In plain terms he stated his abhorrence of the proposal; he was at a loss to conceive what part of his conduct could have encouraged their address; they could not have found a person to whom their schemes were more disagreeable; and he charged them, if you have any regard for yourself or posterity, or respect for me, to banish these thoughts from your mind, and never communicate, as from yourself or any one else, a sentiment of the like nature. His influence, and his alone, secured the quiet disbanding of the discontented army. That influence was as powerful after he had retired to Mount Vernon as before the resignation of his command. The Society of the Cincinnati, an organization composed of officers of the late war, chose him as its first president; but he insisted that the Society should abandon its plan of hereditary membership, and change other features of the organization against which there had been public clamour. When the legislature of Virginia gave him 150 shares of stock in companies formed for the improvement of the Potomac and James rivers, and he was unable to refuse them lest his action should be misinterpreted, he extricated himself by giving them to educational institutions. His voluminous correspondence shows his continued concern for a standing army and the immediate possession of the western military posts, and his interest in the development of the western territory. From public men in all parts of the country he received such a store of suggestions as came to no other man, digested it, and was enabled by means of it to speak with what seemed infallible wisdom. In the midst of a burden of letterwriting, the minute details in his diaries of tree-planting and rotation of crops, and his increasing reading on the political side of history, he found time to entertain a stream of visitors from all parts of the United States and from abroad. Among these, in March 1785, were the commissioners from Virginia and Maryland, who met at Alexandria to form a commercial code for Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac, and made an opportunity to visit Mount Vernon. From that moment the current of events, leading into the Annapolis Convention of 1786 and the Federal Convention of the following year, shows Washington's close supervision at every point.  When the Federal Convention met at Philadelphia in May 1787 to frame the present constitution, Washington was present as a delegate from Virginia, though much against his will; and a unanimous vote at once made him the presiding officer. Naturally, therefore, he did not participate in debate; and he seems to have spoken but once, and then to favor an amendment reducing from 40,000 to 30,000 the minimum population required as a basis of representation in the House. The mere suggestion, coming from him, was sufficient, and the change was at once agreed to. He approved the constitution which was decided upon, believing, as he said, that it was the best constitution which could be obtained at that epoch, and that this or a dissolution awaits our choice, and is the only alternative. As president of the convention he signed the constitution, and kept the papers of the convention until the adoption of the new government, when they were deposited in the Department of State. All his vast influence was given to secure the ratification of the new instrument, and his influence was probably decisive. When enough states had ratified to assure the success of the new government, and the time came to elect a president, there was no hesitation. The office of president had been cut to fit the measure of George Washington, and no one thought of any other person in connection with it. The unanimous vote of the electors made him the first president of the United States; their unanimous vote elected him for a second time in 1792-1793; and even after he had positively refused to serve for a third term, two electors voted for him in 1796-1797.  While the success of the new government was the work of many men and many causes, one cannot resist the conviction that the factor of chief importance was the existence, at the head of the executive department, of such a character as Washington. It was he who gave to official intercourse formal dignity and distinction. It was he who secured for the president the power of removal from office without the intervention of the Senate. His support of Hamilton's financial plans not only insured a speedy restoration of public credit, but also, and even more important, gave the new government constitutional ground on which to stand; while his firmness in dealing with the Whisky Insurrection taught a much-needed and wholesome lesson of respect for the Federal power. His official visits to New England in 1789, to Rhode Island in 1790 and to the South in 1791 enabled him to test public opinion at the same time that they increased popular interest in the national government. Himself not a political partisan, he held the two natural parties apart, and prevented party contest, until the government had become too firmly established to be shaken by them. Perhaps the final result would not in any case have failed, even had blood and iron been necessary to bring it about; but the quiet attainment of the result was due to the personality of Washington, as well as to the political sense of the American people.  It would be a great mistake to suppose, however, that the influence of the president was fairly appreciated during his term of office, or that he himself was uniformly respected. Washington seems never to have understood fully either the nature, the significance, or the inevitable necessity of party government in a republic. Instead, he attempted to balance party against party, selected representatives of opposing political views to serve in his first cabinet, and sought in that way to neutralize the effects of parties. The consequence was that the two leading members of the cabinet, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, exponents for the most part of diametrically opposite political doctrines, soon occupied the position, to use the words of one of them, of two same-cocks in a pit. The unconscious drift of Washington's mind was toward the Federalist party; his letters to La Fayette and to Patrick Henry, in December 1798 and January 1799, make that evident even without the record of his earlier career as president. It is inconceivable that, to a man with his type of mind and his extraordinary experience, the practical sagacity, farsightedness and aggressive courage of the Federalists should not have seemed to embody the best political wisdom, however little he may have been disposed to ally himself with any party group or subscribe to any comprehensive creed. Accordingly, when the Democratic Republican party came to be formed, about 1793, it was not to be expected that its leaders would long submit with patience to the continual interposition of Washington's name and influence between themselves and their opponents; but they maintained a calm exterior. Some of their followers were less discreet. The president's proclamation of neutrality, in the war between England and France, excited them to anger; his support of Jay's treaty with Great Britain roused them to fury. His firmness in thwarting the activities of Edmond Charles Edouard Genet, minister from France, alienated the partisans of France; his suppression of the Whisky Insurrection aroused in some the fear of a military despotism. Forged letters, purporting to show his desire to abandon the revolutionary struggle, were published; he was accused of drawing more than his salary; his manners were ridiculed as aping monarchy; hints of the propriety of a guillotine for his benefit began to appear; he was spoken of as the stepfather of his country. The brutal attacks, exceeding in virulence anything that would be tolerated to-day, embittered his presidency, especially during his second term: in 1793 he is reported to have declared, in a cabinet meeting, that he would rather be in his grave than in his present situation, and that he had never repented but once the having slipped the moment of resigning his office, and that was every moment since. The most unpleasant portions of Jefferson's notes are those in which, with an air of psychological dissection, he details the storms of passion into which the president was driven by the newspaper attacks upon him. There is no reason to believe, however, that these attacks represented the feeling of any save a small minority of the politicians; the people never wavered in their devotion to the president, and his election would have been unanimous in 1796, as in 1792 and 1789, had he been willing to serve.  He retired from the presidency in 1797 and returned to Mount Vernon, his journey thither being marked by popular demonstrations of affection and esteem. At Mount Vernon, which had suffered from neglect during his absence, he resumed the plantation life which he loved, the society of his family, and the care of his slaves. He had resolved some time before never to obtain another slave, and wished from his soul that Virginia could be persuaded to abolish slavery; it might prevent much future mischief; but the unprecedented profitableness of the cotton industry, under the impetus of the recently invented cotton gin, had already begun to change public sentiment regarding slavery, and Washington was too old to attempt further innovations. Visitors continued to flock to him, and his correspondence, as always, took a wide range. In 1798 he was made commander-in-chief of the provisional army raised in anticipation of war with France (He had previously, under date of the 17th of September 1796, issued a notable Farewell Address to the American people.) and was fretted almost beyond endurance by the quarrels of Federalist politicians over the distribution of commissions. In the midst of these military preparations he was struck down by sudden illness, which lasted but for a day, and died at Mount Vernon on the 14th of December 1799. His disorder was an oedematous affection of the wind-pipe, contracted by exposure during a long ride in a snowstorm, and aggravated by neglect and by such contemporary remedies as bleeding, gargles of molasses, vinegar and butter and vinegar and sage tea, which almost suffocated him, and a blister of cantharides on the throat. He died as simply as he had lived; his last words were only business directions, affectionate remembrances to relatives, and repeated apologies to the physicians and attendants for the trouble he was giving them. Just before he died, says his secretary, Tobias Lear, he felt his own pulse; his countenance changed; the attending physician placed his hands over the eyes of the dying man, and he expired without a struggle or a sigh. The third of the series of resolutions introduced in the House of Representatives five days after his death, by John Marshall of Virginia, later chief-justice of the Supreme Court, states exactly, if somewhat rhetorically, the position of Washingtion in American history: first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen. (This characterization originated with Henry Lee.) His will contained a provision freeing his slaves, and a request that no oration be pronounced at his funeral. His remains rest in the family vault at Mount Vernon.  All contemporary accounts agree that Washington was of imposing presence. He measured just 6 ft. when prepared for burial; but his height in his prime, as given in his orders for clothes from London, was 3 in. more. La Fayette says that his hands were the largest he ever saw on a man. Custis says that his complexion was fair, but considerably florid. His weight was about 220 lbs. Evidently it was his extraordinary dignity and poise, forbidding even the suggestion of familiarity, quite as much as his stature, that impressed those who knew him. The various and widely-differing portraits of him find exhaustive treatment in the seventh volume of Justin Winsor's *Narrative and Critical History of America*. Winsor thinks that the favorite profile has been. unquestionably Houdon's, with Gilbert Stuart's canvas for the full face and probably John Trumbull's for the figure. Stuart's face, however, with its calm and benign expression, has fixed the popular notion of Washington.  Washington was childless: the people of his time said he was the father only of his country. Collateral branches of the family have given the Lees, the Custises, and other families a claim to an infusion of the blood.  Purchase [books about George Washington](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/external-search?tag=usefultrivia-20&keyword=george+washington&mode=books)  Purchase [Posters of George Washington](http://affiliates.allposters.com/link/redirect.asp?AID=2025717449&PSTID=1&LTID=5&startat=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Eallposters%2Ecom%2FGetThumb%2Easp%3Fc%3Dc%26search%3D1603)   |  | | --- | | This article is reprinted from Encyclopaedia Britannica, Eleventh Edition. New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica Co., 1911. | |

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