

60-Second Presidents



George Washington – Background Essay

George Washington (1732-1799) was born on a plantation in eastern Virginia. His father, Augustine, was a wealthy planter who died in 1743. Washington and his brothers inherited portions of Augustine's landholdings. However, the division of the family's resources may have prevented Washington from attending prestigious and expensive boarding schools in England, as his older brothers had. Instead, Washington was educated at less-formal American schools.

Washington was an ambitious young man. As a teenager, he found work as a surveyor, mapping out lands in western Virginia. In his early 20s, he requested a position in the colonial militia. He was ultimately sent to serve on the western frontier, where Britain and France were disputing ownership and control of the Ohio River Valley. Washington is often credited with starting the French and Indian War in 1754. Under orders to facilitate the construction of a fort at the site of modern-day Pittsburgh, he encountered and attacked a small French force, even though Britain and France were not officially at war. Washington's military service in the years that followed gave him valuable leadership and tactical experience.

Upon leaving the military, Washington turned his attention to farming. He was an excellent businessman, and his marriage to the widow Martha Dandridge Custis in 1759 greatly expanded his landholdings and slaveholdings. Washington was now one of the wealthiest and most respected planters in Virginia; he also became more civically involved by serving as an elected member of the colonial House of Burgesses.

As Washington's prominence grew, so did his resentment of British rule. Virginians selected him as a delegate to the First Continental Congress. When fighting broke out between colonists and British forces in 1775, Washington accepted command of the American army. His eventual victory in the Revolutionary War made him the most admired man in the newly formed United States.

The young national government struggled under the Articles of Confederation, and Washington agreed to preside over the Constitutional Convention in 1787. By lending his moral authority to that effort, he helped

ensure its success. He then continued to serve the nation by consenting to serve as the first president.

The duties of the president were only loosely outlined by the Constitution, so Washington had considerable latitude on how to organize the executive branch and perform his job. Any action he took had the potential to set a precedent for his successors, and many of his decisions had profound long-term effects. For example, Washington established that the president was in charge of hiring and firing for the executive branch; he also established that the president could negotiate treaties without first seeking permission from Congress.

But Washington had little interest in testing the limits of executive or federal power. Instead, he focused on ensuring the stability and legitimacy of the new government. He refused to join a political party, which helped remove him from political disputes between northern and southern states. Most famously, Washington retired after two terms, even though his personal popularity would have allowed him to serve more. By voluntarily yielding power, he made a powerful statement about the nature of American democracy.