

George Washington's Birthday Celebration

The Maryland State House

Old Senate Chamber

February 20, 2023

Address by Senator Nancy J. King:

Mr. President, Colleagues, Guests, Family and Friends,

I would like you to take a minute and look around this room. And as you are looking, I would like you to imagine what this very room was like on December 23rd 1783. The day Washington resigned his commission as leader of the Continental Army.

Remember that it was just a few months earlier on September 3rd of 1783, that the Treaty of Paris was signed and less than a month earlier on November 25th, that the last of the British Troops evacuated New York City. The Continental Congress that was meeting here in Annapolis, our nation's capital at the time, was dealing with a myriad of problems facing their new nation. They were under dire financial straits, they were dealing with interstate rivalries, and they were trying to come to terms over state vs federal powers, representation, and commerce. Yet, despite all the issues they were dealing with at the time, they understood the importance of what was to happen when General Washington came to town in December of 1783.

Earlier in the year Washington had written to the President of Congress, "It is essential for me to know their pleasure, and in what manner will be most proper to offer my resignation, whether in writing or at an Audience." On December 20th Congress determined that Washington would resign, "to a public audience, on Tuesday next, at twelve o'clock."

What I find fascinating is that despite the turmoil of the time and all that this young Congress was facing, they took the time to develop a protocol for this event. An ad hoc protocol committee was formed and consisted of Thomas Jefferson, Elbridge Gerry and James McHenry. This was their report to Congress:

1. The President and members are to be seated and covered, and the secretary to be standing by the side of the President.
2. The arrival of the General is to be announced by the messenger to the secretary, who is thereupon to introduce the General attended by his aids to the Hall of Congress.

3. The General being conducted to a chair by the secretary is to be seated with an aid on each side, standing, and the secretary is to resume his place.

4. After a proper time for the arrangement of spectators, silence is to be ordered by the secretary, if necessary, and the President is to address the General in the following words:

‘Sir, the United States in Congress assembled are prepared to receive your communications.’ Whereupon the General is to arise and address Congress, and being seated again after which he is to deliver [his Commission and a] copy of his address to his aid to be presented to the Secretary [to the President]

5. The aid having resumed his place, by the side of the General the President is to deliver the answer of Congress, which the General is to receive standing.

6. The President having finished, the secretary is to deliver the General a copy of the address answer, and receive the commission from the General, who [and the General] is then to take his leave. When the General rises to make his address, and also when he retires, he is to bow to Congress, which they are to return by uncovering without bowing.”

General Washington did bow to Congress and Congress did remove their hats and Washington left Annapolis in order to be back in Mount Vernon for Christmas.

But Washington’s retirement from public life didn’t last too long. Less than six years later, in April of 1789, Washington stood on a balcony at Federal Hall in New York and took the oath of office as the first President of the United States.

In a letter he wrote to James Madison, our first President said, “As the first of everything in our situation will serve to establish a Precedent, it is devoutly wished on my part that these precedents may be fixed on true principles.”

These “true principles” were ingrained early on in Washington’s life. Washington’s father died when George was only eleven years old and his mother, Mary Ball Washington, who some historians refer to as an exceptionally strong, resilient and religious woman, raised five children alone and instilled in them qualities of fortitude and purpose.

After she was widowed, she didn't have the money to send George to school in England, as was common for well-to-do Virginia families at the time. But despite enlisting him and his siblings to help run the farm, she did ensure that George received a basic education in reading, writing, and mathematics. Most likely as a part of his schooling, George wrote out the *The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*, a list of 110 rules that were written by French Jesuits around 1545.

George Washington not only used this book of rules to supplement his education and enable him to later be able to correspond with the wealthy in colonial society, but he stringently applied the handbook's moral code to his personal life. This early attention to morality led to George Washington's later reputation as an honest and principled man.

So, it is no surprise that protocol, decent behavior, and civility were things that Washington brought to the Government of our new nation. And now, almost 234 years since Washington first took his oath of office, we need to remind ourselves that protocol, decent behavior, and civility are just as important as they were back then, perhaps even more so.

Civility is defined as formal politeness and courtesy in behavior or speech. And at a larger level, civility governs our attitudes towards all other members of society and should be the guiding star governing in our interactions between individuals and groups, organizations, institutions, and all levels of government and business as well.

The Rules of Civility that Washington followed are no different from many of the lessons that we learned at an early age from our parents, grandparents and teachers. And majority of these Rules still hold a place in our daily lives.

With my apologies to the 16th century Jesuits who originally penned these rules and to George Washington who lived by them, here is my more modern take on some of those Rules:

Rule 6 "Sleep not when others Speak, Sit not when others stand, Speak not when you Should hold your Peace, walk not on when others stop."

"If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all."

Rule 18 "Read no letters, books, or papers in company but when there is a necessity for the doing of it you must ask leave: come not near the books or writings of another so as

to read them unless desired or give your opinion of them unasked also look not nigh when another is writing a letter.”

If this was written today, I think it would be more like this: “If you are hanging out with other people, put your cell phone away. And if you must take a call, move so others don’t have to hear you. And if you’re near someone’s computer or phone, keep your eyes to yourself and stop trying to read their email.”

Rule 35 “Let your discourse with men of business be short and comprehensive.”

“We’re all busy, so be respectful of people’s time.”

Rule 38 “In visiting the sick, do not presently play the physician if you be not knowing therein.”

In today’s words, “don’t ever tell someone who is ill that you Googled their symptoms and you know what they need to do to get better.”

Rule 48 “Wherein you reprove Another be unblameable yourself; for example, is more prevalent than Precepts.”

In other words – “People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.”

And finally, **Rule 73**. “Think before you speak, pronounce not imperfectly nor bring out your words too hastily but orderly & distinctly.”

Rule 73 needs no modern translation. I think this one has done just fine over the last five centuries.

Colleagues and friends, George Washington and the founders of our country didn’t get everything right. But they did teach us the importance of bravery, teamwork, and civility.

And so, I ask you again tonight to look around this room and remember all those who set the groundwork for protocol and civility in our government. As we move to the future, we cannot forget the past and we must always remember the importance of treating each other with kindness and respect.

I am sure George Washington would agree with me that the 110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior can be summed up with the one adage we all learned as children:

Be kind and treat others as you would want to be treated.

Thank you.



Senator Nancy J. King