

Washington Birthday Address

Senator Cory V. McCray

Old Senate Chamber

February 19, 2024

Dear Colleagues,

I am humbled and honored to have the opportunity to address this esteemed assembly today and embrace 40 years of tradition in the Old Senate Chamber, as we delve into the life and legacy of one of the founding fathers of our nation and our first President. My readings about the founding fathers have shaped my understanding of the revolutionary era, and the early days of our nation. However, it was a conversation with a friend of mine that elevated my admiration for George Washington.

This newfound perspective stemmed from a simple yet revealing question I often pose to fellow history enthusiasts: “Who are your top three presidents?” Typically, those with a deep-rooted interest in history provide answers that spark engaging discussions. When I presented this question to my friend Patrick, he immediately mentioned George Washington. And when I pressed further, and he explained that Washington is unique because he is “the only President who voluntarily relinquished absolute power, not once but twice.” These words, that were shared over a decade ago, altered my view of President Washington. And from that day onwards I would see him through this lens: a lens which emphasizes his commitment to the principles of democracy and leadership.

Much can be said about President George Washington. He was an aspiring learner, a conscientious dresser, punctual, a masterful listener, voracious reader, planter, surveyor, and military strategist.

General Washington, who was born at 10:00 AM on February 11, 1732, graced this world with his presence for sixty-seven years until his passing on December 14, 1799. His life would go on to span pivotal moments in our nation’s history, during which he played a central role in shaping the country.

From an early age, Washington exhibited a unique understanding of leadership, demonstrating the principle that true leaders lead by example. This philosophy helped him earn the respect and loyalty of his soldiers and peers alike, setting a standard for future generations.

Washington believed firmly in the power of experience, adhering to the principle that "Errors once discovered are more than half amended." He was a proponent of the idea that some individuals accumulate a wealth of experience in a few years that others might take decades to amass. His emphasis on learning from experience, rather than merely accumulating it, was an important part of his philosophy.

When it comes to reputation and integrity, Washington was unwavering. He understood that while monetary gains could come and go, a solid reputation was the most valuable asset one could possess – for it would last a lifetime. Demonstrating his commitment to service over personal gain, he declined a proposed salary as Commander in Chief of the American Army, opting instead to have only his expenses covered, thereby ensuring that his motivations remained pure and focused on the greater good.

On the military front, Washington also had a keen eye for talent. He surrounded himself with young and promising figures which include Nathaniel Greene, Henry Knox, and Joseph Reed. He recognized the advantage of nurturing talented individuals, understanding that their contributions would be instrumental in the nation's success.

Through preparation for battle, he forged a disciplined and resilient army. This army was comprised of the poor, the young, and the downtrodden, all united under a common cause despite challenges from governmental entities and dissent within the military hierarchy. Washington's leadership in this endeavor showcased his ability to unite diverse groups towards a common goal, a testament to his vision and leadership.

After the triumph in the Revolutionary War, Washington had the opportunity to maintain his military command or assume the role of head of state. Yet, his decision to retire to private life was seen as a monumental act of selflessness. His contemporaries remarked that such a move would cement his status as 'The greatest man in the world'.

As the first President, Washington faced the pressure of setting precedents for a new nation. He understood the importance of assembling a capable team to guide the young country through its formative years.

Under his leadership, the nation achieved significant milestones: the framing of the Constitution, the establishment of Congress, the shaping of the judicial branch, the positioning of the national

government, the founding of the national bank, and much more. These accomplishments formed the bedrock of American governance and society. In other words, without Washington and the foundations that he helped build, this country wouldn't be what it is today.

Washington's decision to leave office after two terms was a voluntary act, as the 22nd Amendment, which limits a president to two terms, was not ratified until 1951. His intention was always to serve as a caretaker president, ensuring the new Constitution was established, never anticipating it would require two full terms. His resignation from power was not born from a lack of ambition but from an understanding of the importance of setting a precedent for the peaceful transfer of power, a hallmark of the democratic process and custom that he helped establish.

As I conclude this speech, it is important to acknowledge the imperfections in all of us, presidents included. Washington himself was cognizant of these human flaws. In a letter to his advisor David Stuart, he lamented his own shortcomings, particularly his failure to publicly oppose slavery—a failure he described as a 'blemish' on his record. While Washington harbored private reservations about slavery, he regrettably never expressed these views in his public statements, choosing instead to act discreetly in his personal capacity.

While he lacked the courage to confront the matter head-on, he notably did not obstruct those who sought to address it. A prime example is his decision to appoint Marylander Andrew Ellicott, a known abolitionist, to survey the nation's capital, Washington D.C. Washington gave Ellicott the freedom to select his own team, which notably included Benjamin Banneker, an African American polymath. This decision, albeit subtle, indicates Washington's understanding of societal change.

The Genius of Washington was his ability to use inaction as a tool. The Genius of Washington was to use silence as a tool. But I also agree with my friend Patrick that the Genius of Washington was to have the foresight to give up absolute power twice - something which no other President has done.

As we reflect on his legacy, it becomes clear that George Washington's unique blend of foresight, humility, and commitment to the greater good solidified his role as one of the major architects of our nation, and a shining light that continues to guide us to this very day.