

A Measure of the Man; Our President, Our Washington.

Delivered by Senator John A. Giannetti, Jr. to the Maryland Senate on Monday, February 16, 2004, while assembled in the historic Old Senate Chamber of the Maryland Statehouse.

Good Evening.

Mr. President, Members of the Senate, gathered guests.

Before we get underway, I'd like to take care of a few formalities. I introduce my fiancée, Erin Appel, and my Father, John Giannetti, Sr. And lest anyone here believe that a family of artists such as the Giannetti's can have no true connections to the great George Washington, let it be known that it was 30 years ago this year that this legislature approved funds for a small project in Bladensburg--the restoration of a tavern known to all as the George Washington House. The leader of the project, to save the historic tavern from certain destruction, was none other than my father. The house still stands today, a testament to his toils. And I would be remiss if I did not say that the renovation of Washington's home, Mount Vernon, would not have been so historically correct had it not been for my father and his brother, who donated their time to restore some of the plasterwork in the national landmark.

Tonight I have the honor of presenting the speech commemorating the birthday of our first president. All here must know that I chose not to engage the services of our esteemed archivist, but rather used personal resources and resources lent to me from my father. I have liberally borrowed passages from Flexner's outstanding books, and have used websites, notably the PBS website, and borrowed liberally from Stanley Weintraub's newest book published this year.

I thought, for tonight's speech, it maybe useful to try to evoke a clearer sense of who this man, George Washington, was. What was it like to have actually been in his presence, to look him in the eye, to gauge his manner? I will try to explain the extraordinary affect he had on others, and will try to capture and feel the gravity of the moment which occurred in this very room 221 years ago.

I present to you: A Measure of the Man, Our President, Our Washington.

How can we, as modern Americans, doubt the eminence of a man we see on every quarter, on every dollar, and as Marylanders, living so near our nation's capitol, the shining city, which bears his name? Why, we likely could not avoid seeing his image or *hearing his name each day, except under the wildest and most contrived circumstances.*

What type of man must this George Washington have been, to inspire those for so long to note where he slept, and where he stayed? Certainly, one could suppose that history has, by its own momentum, enlarged the myth and mystery of our first president. History has a way of doing that, and it is a worthy question to ask.

History, I believe, is best experienced by first hand accounts if possible. It is the tactile sensation of history that leaves an impression. It is the way our brain processes information; we read, and we may remember, we touch and interact, and we will *remember*.

But how can we make Washington's history come alive? And even more vexing to this speaker, how can history of a man dead 200 years come alive--so we can touch him? We must first rely on the words of those who knew him, who heard him, and who saw him. *We must relate the history to something we know, something we can touch.*

Certainly historical analysis is critical in any examination of this man, but this is not my task before you tonight. The historical reflection is my own, the words you hear will be those who actually knew Washington, who actually shook his hand, who danced with him, drank with him, and fought with him. For our duty tonight, we can trust no other words, no other witness, than those who bore true witness of the man.

So on we go, let us embark. To attempt to touch and feel history is to begin to understand *history*.

A fellow officer described George Washington's physique: "Straight as an Indian, measuring six feet two... and weighing 175 lbs. His frame is padded with well-developed muscles, indicating great strength. His bones and joints are large, as are his hands and feet. He is wide shouldered but has not a deep or round chest; he is neat waisted, but is broad across the hips and has rather long legs and arms. His head is well-shaped, though not large. A large and straight rather than a prominent nose; blue gray penetrating eyes, which are widely separated and overhung by a heavy brow. His face is long rather than broad, with high round cheekbones, and terminates in a good firm chin. He has a colorless pale skin which burns with the sun, a pleasing and benevolent, though a *commanding, countenance, and dark brown hair which he wears in a cue.*"

Another writes: "His mouth is large and generally firmly closed, but which from time to time discloses some defective teeth. His features are regular and placid with all the muscles of his face under perfect control, though flexible and expressive of deep feeling *when moved by emotions.*"

Adds another: "In conversation, he looks at you full in the face, is deliberate, deferential, and engaging. His voice is agreeable rather than strong. His demeanor at all times composed and dignified. His movements and gestures are graceful, his walk majestic, and *he is a splendid horseman.*"

Gilbert Stuart, the famed painter of the age, noted that Washington had: "Features in his face totally different from what I had observed in any other human being. The sockets of the eyes, for instance, were larger than what I had ever met before, the upper part of the nose broader. All the features were indicative of the strongest passions, yet, his judgment

and self-command made him appear of a different cast in the eyes of the world...Had he been born in the forests...he would have been the fiercest man among the savage tribes.”

And how about those teeth? No, they certainly were not made of wood; a dental accommodation of that sort would certainly have left the wearer with a mouth full of sawdust and splinters. No, they were not wood, but a variety of other materials. One set of dentures, made of ivory, were fastened by two wooden plates, an upper and a lower. The many sets of dentures made for Washington had two things in common—they all uncomfortable and they were all eventually stained dark--due, one must imagine, in no small part to Washington’s love of Madeira wine.

His physical appearances and general countenance were remarkable to his describers: The Marquis de Chastellux, writes, as a personal note: “The strongest characteristic of this respectable man is the perfect harmony which reigns between the physical and moral qualities which compose his personality.” He adds: “It is not my intention to exaggerate, I wish only to express the impression General Washington has left on my mind; the idea of a *perfect whole*.”

A London paper, wishing to describe his general appearance and majesty, stated that *every king in Europe would look like a valet by Washington’s side*.

In 1789 Jedidiah Morse noted: “There was in his whole appearance an unusual dignity and gracefulness, which at once secured him profound respect and cordial esteem. He seemed born to command his fellow men.”

And it was the conclusion of many a first-hand observer, that this great man was born to *lead*.

Said Gouverneur Morris to an audience: “So dignified his deportment, no man could approach him but with respect.... You have all seen him, and you all felt the reverence he inspired.”

The effect Washington had on those around him is surprisingly consistent: In 1778, Dr. James Thatcher notes Washington’s: “Serenity of his countenance, and majestic gracefulness of his deportment, noting, that no one can stand in his presence without feeling the ascendancy of his mind, and associating with his countenance the idea of wisdom, philanthropy, magnanimity, and patriotism.”

None other than the Marquis de Lafayette noted of Washington’s affect on his soldiers--which reversed a confused retreat at the Battle of Monmouth: “General Washington seemed to arrest fortune with one glance.”

The sources all proclaim the same, time and time again. This is a man--was a man--that had an extraordinary effect on those around him. When one reads the private descriptions and letters to others about our first President, one can’t help but believe that General

Washington--President Washington--was singularly placed by some divine majesty for us in America.

It seems that the qualities that separated Washington were present early on:

Listen and feel the words of this address from men serving under Washington, urging him not to retire his command:

“Your steady adherence to impartial justice, your quick discernment and invariable regard to merit, first heightened our natural emulation and our desire to excel. How great the loss of such a man? It gives us additional sorrow, to find our unhappy country will receive a loss no less irreparable than ourselves. In you we place the most implicit confidence. Your presence only will cause a steady firmness and vigor to actuate in every breast--despising the greatest dangers and thinking light of toils and hardships, while led on by the man we know and love.”

These words were uttered to Washington not later in life, not after the Revolution, but to the young George Washington, age 26. At so young an age, it seems impossible to imagine so strong a leader.

Washington touched so many people in this way, the examples are endless. His life is filled with story upon story, example upon example of his character and quality. Those he touched were proud; perhaps that's why we still see so many sites along the east coast proudly proclaiming—Washington Slept Here! It's either that the man did nothing but sleep, or perhaps something else altogether—it is a very human attempt to reach out and touch a moment in time. A time when a tavern, or guest house, or a building, for a fleeting moment, touched the life of and shared a moment with a truly great man.

This hallowed hall, where the Senate convenes tonight, had more than just a fleeting touch with this great man. And it is for this reason that we commemorate this evening's session with a speech in this very room. For it is here, perhaps even where I am now standing, that Washington made the most incredible and noble gesture in the history of our country, some say it was a gesture unmatched in the history of civilized society. Let us reach out and understand the event that touched this very hall.

With the Treaty with Britain negotiated and signed in Paris, and with the British fleet leaving the shores of the former colonies, Washington wanted nothing more than to return to Mt. Vernon, return to private life. His fellow officers likened him to a modern day Cincinnatus, the Roman king of 5th Century BC who left his leadership of a nation and returned back to the plow and to a dignified, civic life.

The story of his resignation resounds with places and objects we all recognize, we all interact with, and we all touch, even today.

It was the Christmas season, 1783. General Gates and General Smallwood met Washington at the Severn river crossing (where it was still narrow) and accompanied Washington to Annapolis.

As he entered the town, 13 volleys of cannon fire announced the general's arrival. Many agreed that this town of Annapolis was certainly a better meeting place for the Congress than the small country town of Princeton, NJ had been. Wrote David Howell of RI, "The city stands on rising ground and looks into the bay by a most beautiful prospect. The Severn runs by it on the north west and another river to the east so that we appear to be almost surrounded by water. The state house and the house assigned to the President of Congress are spacious and elegantly finished." He also mentions the playhouse, a ballroom, and many good taverns, not to mention the racetrack that Washington loved to visit.

Washington stayed at George Mann's hotel at the corner of Main and Conduit, by all accounts a fine hotel.

Charles Thompson called Annapolis a town "Where Pleasure holds her Court" and where there existed "turkeys, fine fish, and oysters." Howell, ever the Rhode Islander, derided the amusements available such as "plays, Balls, Concerts, routs, hops, Fandangoes & last but not least fox hunting." It is said that Washington was a real fan of Fandangoes.

The night before the historic day, a ball sponsored by the newly reelected governor, and signer of the Declaration of Independence, William Paca, was held. The state house was the location for the event.

First there was a dinner unlike any other. There were the ceremonial 13 toasts (this number was expected) and 98 bottles of wine were consumed along with two and one half gallons of spirits. Receipts show charges for musicians, eight pounds of candles, and twelve packs of cards.

After the dinner was the ball, and now women were invited in. James Tilton, of Delaware, called the function "the most extraordinary I have ever attended" and gives a hilarious homage to the crustacean delicacy of the region: of ladies in stiff dresses and hoop skirts, some two feet on each side, entering the ballroom, "like a crab, pointing their obtruding flanks end foremost." The most fashionable ladies wore the popular hairstyle of the day, with their hair coiffed with 13 curls on the neck.

Washington, this man alive with energy, danced with each woman that requested an opportunity to touch gloved hands with a living legend.

Observers noted that Washington danced every set of the night. The party, it seems, broke at 2am, for there was important business in the morning.

Finally the day had arrived. Noon was the appointed hour. Delegates from nine states of the Congress provided the necessary quorum to accept the resignation. Washington, in his

buff and blue military uniform, entered the chamber at the appointed hour and took a seat next to Thomas Mifflin of Pennsylvania, president of the Congress.

The Congress was seated, with tri-cornered hats on their heads in the chamber. The doors were opened for the guests. The esteemed guests included our fair state's Senate and House of Delegates, and the principal ladies and gentlemen of the city. Guests were packed in along the walls--the gallery above, packed with all it could hold. All gazed at the General, to be present at this moment in history.

Governor Mifflin: "Sir, the United States in Congress Assembled are prepared to receive your communications." It was a historic moment, and all watched every muscle, every movement, of the retiring general. Washington rose and bowed, members removed their hats and replaced them, and Washington, this man of majesty, this unshakable leader, larger than life, was visibly shaking.

"Mr. President", he started, and his voice, according to one witness, "faltered and sunk" He then "recovered himself, and proceeded, in a most penetrating manner"

"The great events on which my resignation depended having at length taken place; I have now the honor of offering my sincere Congratulations to Congress and of presenting myself before them to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to claim the indulgence of retiring from the Service of my Country..."

The Great Washington spoke right here, in this very room, while the packed room watched in anticipated silence.

He was making the most important speech in the history of the country, and in the view of some, including this speaker, "the most significant address ever delivered to a civil society."

Washington broke from his speech upon the mention of his soldiers. He began again, both shaking hands clutching his speech. "Having now finished this work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre of Action, and bidding an Affectionate farewell to this August body under whose orders I have so long enacted, I here offer my Commission, and take my leave of all the employments of public life."

Washington removed a roll of parchment, his commission of June 15, 1775, and placed it in the hands of Thomas Mifflin, thus voluntarily ending his command.

The gravity of the moment overwhelmed the audience. James McHenry, a Marylander, noted that "The spectators all wept, and there was hardly a member of Congress who did not drop tears."

The memory of the tears of that day are still present in this hall, the wood itself holding tight the memories forever. In quiet moments, you can almost hear the muffled crying of

an audience overwhelmed with an understanding of the meaning of that single moment in history. That moment occurred right here.

Washington, after greeting the guests, was accompanied by president Mifflin to the ferry to cross the South River. Washington's aim was to make it home to his beloved Martha by the next day, Christmas Eve.

As he left the shore, the modern Cincinnatus, left the field covered with honor and withdrew from public life, to enjoy *civium cum dignitate*, a civilian life with great dignity and honor. And like the historic Roman figure, Washington would again be called from his private life, not once, but twice—once to chair the historic meeting in Philadelphia in 1787 from which was borne our Constitution, and another to lead our country as President.

To add an appropriate encore to a very dramatic play, in 1796, after two terms as the first president of the young republic, Washington, in a gesture nearly as spectacular as the first resignation, again resigned to live the life of a planter and horsemen at his beloved Mt. Vernon.

In case you need one final example of the nation's love for Washington--

I have here a book of my private collection, dated 1806, nearly two hundred years old. It's a political primer for the use of schools in the state of Maryland. It has but three documents contained inside: From third to first—it contains the Constitution of the State of Maryland, The Constitution of the United States, and first and foremost in this book to teach the young students of our great state, is General Washington's speech announcing his retirement from public life.

I encourage each of you to touch this book, and feel the history it holds.

I hope in some small way, I've helped you to derive a new perspective on our first President, I hope you will now know him and keep him more dearly in your heart and in your memory. George Washington was a man full of life, and he lives within the hearts of us all.

Thank you, God Bless You, and may God forever bless our greatest American, George Washington.