The time is now and near at hand which must probably determine whether Americans are to be freemen or slaves. . . . Our cruel and unrelenting enemy leaves us the only choice of brave resistance, or the most abject submission. We have, therefore, to resolve to conquer or die.

—George Washington, 1776

Introduction
Americans have long appreciated the importance of George Washington to their nation’s history. Deemed “the indispensable man” by one historian, Washington secured American independence as commander of the Continental Army and established republican traditions as the nation’s first president. His unblemished character and force of personality steeld men’s hearts in combat and stirred their souls in peace. But only recently have historians begun to recognize Washington’s intellectual contributions to the formation of the American republic. Though never a systematic thinker, Washington understood the relationship between political theory and practice and was a close associate of many of the leading statesmen of the day, such as James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson. Indeed, the friendship between Washington and Madison is one of the most important political partnerships of the Founding Era.

During the 1780s, Washington’s home at Mount Vernon served as a crossroads for ideas that led to the shaping of the Constitution in 1787 at Philadelphia. Representatives of the Confederation Congress, delegates to the Constitutional Convention, and members of state ratifying conventions all stopped at Mount Vernon during the decade on their journeys north and south. Few of these conversations are recorded in detail, but no other private home in America was the scene of so many discussions among the politically powerful. It could justly be said that the outlines of the new republic were largely drawn one hundred feet above the Potomac River on a farm whose location marked the exact geographic midpoint between North and South.

Relevant Thematic Essays for George Washington

• Republican Government
• Limited Government
In His Own Words:

GEORGE WASHINGTON

ON THE CONSTITUTION

Overview
In this lesson, students will learn about George Washington. They should first read as homework Handout A—George Washington (1732–1799) and answer the Reading Comprehension Questions. After discussing the answers to those in class, the teacher should have students answer the Critical Thinking Questions as a class. Next, the teacher should introduce the primary source activity, Handout C—In His Own Words: George Washington on the Constitution in which Washington admonishes citizens of the new nation to cherish the Constitution. As a preface, there is Handout B—Vocabulary and Context Questions, which will help the students understand the document.

There are Follow-Up Homework Options, which ask students to analyze Washington’s leadership qualities, or to reflect further on additional sections of Washington’s address. The Extensions option asks students to compare Washington to other historical figures.

Objectives
Students will:
• explain why Washington is known as “Father of His Country.”
• explain Washington’s reasons for not seeking a third term as President.
• understand the historical significance of Washington’s home, Mount Vernon.
• understand the purposes of Washington’s Farewell Address.
• analyze how the admonitions of Washington’s Farewell Address apply to modern society.
• appreciate the various roles Washington played in defending and creating the new nation and its government.

Standards
CCE (9–12): IIA1, IIC1, IIIA1, IIIA2
NCHS (5–12): Era III, Standards 1C, 3A, 3B, 3D
NCSS: Strands 2, 5, 6, and 10

Materials
Student Handouts
• Handout A—George Washington (1732–1799)
• Handout B—Vocabulary and Context Questions
• Handout C—In His Own Words: George Washington on the Constitution

Additional Teacher Resource
• Answer Key

Recommended Time
One 45-minute class period. Additional time as needed for homework.
I. Background Homework
Ask students to read Handout A—George Washington (1732–1799) and answer the Reading Comprehension Questions.

II. Warm-Up [10 minutes]
A. Review answers to homework questions.
B. Conduct a whole-class discussion to answer the Critical Thinking Questions.
C. Ask a student to summarize the historical significance of George Washington.

George Washington was a Virginia farmer who commanded the Virginia militia and the Continental Army. Washington was chosen to preside over the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention in 1787. He was then unanimously elected as the first president. He is known as the “Father of His Country.”

III. Context [5 minutes]
Explain to students that Washington’s Farewell Address to the nation was written with James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, and was never delivered orally. Rather, it was published in newspapers throughout the nation. The Address represents Washington’s legacy of service to the nation, and the excerpt on Handout C is a representative excerpt of a much longer (seventeen-page) document. Tell students that in his first paragraph, Washington is referring to the Articles of Confederation when he says “your first essay.”

IV. In His Own Words [20 minutes]
A. Distribute Handout B—Vocabulary and Context Questions and Handout C—In His Own Words: George Washington on the Constitution.
B. Divide students into six groups and have them read Handout C and complete Handout B.
C. Assign each group one paragraph from the speech and have them rewrite the paragraph in their own words.
D. Ask students to then write one or two discussion questions about the other paragraphs.
E. When students have finished, ask the group that worked on the first paragraph to stand at the front of the classroom and have a spokesperson read aloud the original paragraph.
F. Next, have a different student from the group present the group’s new paragraph.
G. The class should then present their discussion questions to the remaining students in the group.
H. Have each group in turn go to the front of the class and continue with the “speech” and discussion questions.

Suggested discussion questions/answers:
Paragraph One: Why will the new Constitution better unify the country?/It will form a closer union and address common concerns of the people.
Paragraph Two: Why is the Constitution worthy of Americans’ confidence?/It was carefully crafted, balances government power with liberty, and provides within itself the means for constitutional change.
Paragraph Three: What is necessary for liberty?/Respect for the Constitution and the law.
Paragraph Four: What is one basis of American government?/The people’s right to change their government. Can people ignore the law because they don’t agree with it?/No—the Constitution as it exists should be respected, unless and until it is changed by the people.
Paragraph Five: What does the people’s power depend on? / The responsibility of people to obey the law.

Paragraph Six: What is one reason the country needs a strong government? / Its “extensive” size. What is the significance of “powers properly distributed”? / Separation of powers checks government abuse of liberty.

I. After all groups have presented, ask each student to write a one-sentence summary of Washington’s message. Students should then share their sentences with the class.

Suggested responses:
• The Constitution is worthy of Americans’ confidence.
• Liberty depends on citizens obeying the law and the Constitution.
• The Constitution should be respected and cherished.

V. Wrap-Up Discussion [10 minutes]
Tell students that in his Address, Washington warned Americans to “resist with care the spirit of innovation” regarding the principles of the Constitution. Ask the class if they believe Washington’s message is relevant today. Why or why not?

Students may cite modern controversies about the separation of powers and which branches of government have the authority to do certain things such as declare war, outlaw certain practices, etc. Students may discuss calls for constitutional amendments and whether specific proposed amendments undermine or strengthen the spirit of the Constitution.

VI. Follow-Up Homework Options
A. Ask students to list five qualities that George Washington had as a leader and write two or three sentences about how Washington embodied these traits.
B. Have students choose one of the following quotes from Washington’s Farewell Address and write a paragraph explaining whether they agree or disagree with Washington’s idea.
   1. “And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. It is substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.”
   2. “Promote . . . as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened.”
   3. “It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.”

VII. Extensions
A. Have students research other historical and/or contemporary figures whom they believe embody the same kinds of leadership qualities as George Washington. Students should explain why they chose the leader(s) they did and provide specific examples of the characteristics these leaders have in common with Washington.
B. Have students read more of Washington’s Farewell Address and use it as the inspiration for their own Farewell Address that they might deliver to their school upon graduation. The text of George Washington’s Farewell Address can be found at: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/washing.htm>.
**Lesson Plan**

**Resources**

**Print**

**Internet**

**Selected Works by George Washington**

- *Circular to the States* (1783)
- *First Inaugural Address* (1789)
- *Second Inaugural Address* (1793)
- *Farewell Address* (1796)
When we assumed the Soldier, we did not lay aside the Citizen.

—George Washington

George Washington had called this gathering, but the officers of the Continental Army did not expect their commander-in-chief to appear in person at the meetinghouse at Newburgh, New York. The year was 1783, and though the War for Independence had been won, Congress had failed to pay their salaries. They had been whispering for weeks about marching on Philadelphia and taking control of the government at gunpoint. Washington hoped that he could squelch the treasonous plans.

An officer was in the middle of a fiery speech when Washington appeared at the door. The room fell silent as the great commander strode to the front of the assembly and stepped onto a makeshift platform. Washington said he would read a letter from a congressman that promised the army would receive its due. Washington pulled the letter from his pocket and unfolded it. Then he hesitated and squinted at the paper in front of him. The men shuffled uneasily as their commander reached into his pocket again and removed a pair of reading glasses. Eyeglasses were considered a sign of physical weakness in the era, and Washington had worn his only in the presence of family. But now the general put them on in front of his officers for the first time. “Gentlemen,” Washington said, “you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but nearly blind in the service of my country.” Many officers, reminded of the sacrifices made by their honorable commander, began to weep. With that, the Newburgh Conspiracy was over.

Background
George Washington was born on February 22, 1732, in Westmoreland County, Virginia. His father was a prominent planter who died when Washington was eleven years old. After his father’s death, Washington spent much of his time with his older half-brother, Lawrence, at his plantation home, Mount Vernon.

In 1752, Lawrence died, and Washington inherited the Mount Vernon Estate, which he eventually expanded to 8,000 acres. Washington owned thirty-six slaves at the time he acquired Mount Vernon. By the end of his life, he would own more than 300.

Love and War
Soon after Lawrence’s death, Washington became a major in the Virginia militia. Washington gained recognition for his bravery in combat during the French and Indian War. He was soon made commander of the entire Virginia militia. But Washington was denied the commission in the regular British army that he so desired. Disappointed, he resigned from the militia in 1758 and returned to Mount Vernon.

The next year Washington married the wealthy widow, Martha Dandridge Custis. Martha brought twenty slaves and two children to Mount Vernon. Washington spent the next fifteen years as a gentleman farmer, concentrating on expanding his plantation and improving farming methods. He also served in the House of Burgesses.
Revolution
In 1774, Washington represented Virginia at the Continental Congress. The following year, Congress selected him to be commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. Washington was a logical choice. His honored character was respected by all. He looked the part of a warrior, standing well over six feet tall with a martial demeanor. He was a Virginian, and his appointment rallied southerners to the Patriot cause.

For the next six years, Washington kept the American army alive in the face of a superior British force. In 1778, France signed a treaty of alliance with America. Three years later, Washington's force and the French navy joined together to bottle up the main British force under Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia. With Cornwallis's surrender, the American Revolution was essentially over.

American Cato, American Cincinnatus
In 1783, Washington resigned his commission. Many observers in foreign nations were shocked. It was almost unprecedented for a victorious general to give up power voluntarily. But Washington had tried all his life to imitate two virtuous characters of ancient history.

Washington's favorite play was Cato, written by the Englishman Joseph Addison. The title character of the play was a Roman who died resisting the tyranny of Julius Caesar. Another ancient figure whom Washington admired was the legendary Cincinnatus. He was a Roman farmer who was called upon to take command of the republic's armies and repel Rome's enemies. After their defeat, Cincinnatus put down his sword and became a farmer once more.

Crossroads and Convention
Washington did not have a quiet retirement when he returned to Mount Vernon in 1783. Mount Vernon was a crossroads for political discussion. Guests such as James Madison and Gouverneur Morris spent hours in conversation with Washington about the state of the young nation. During these talks, Washington became convinced that the Articles of Confederation needed revision. "The confederation," Washington wrote in 1785, "appears to me to be little more than a shadow without substance."

Washington was chosen to preside over the Constitutional Convention of 1787, which was called to strengthen the central government. Though he said almost nothing during the debates, Washington's presence had important effects. First, it caused the delegates to be on their best behavior and reassured the country. It is also likely that the presidency would never have been entrusted to one person had the delegates in Independence Hall not known that Washington was certain to be the first chief executive.

The Presidency
Washington declared that the Constitution produced by the Convention was "little short of a miracle." He accepted the electoral college's unanimous decision that he be the first president. During his first term in office, Washington proved to be a nationalist on domestic issues, usually siding with his secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton. The opposition to Hamilton's economic program was headed by the secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson. Political parties began to form around these two men, a development that Washington strongly disliked.

Washington's second term as president was challenged by foreign and domestic troubles. Party conflict worsened as Americans chose sides in the war between Britain and France.
that broke out in 1793. But Washington was able to maintain official neutrality and keep the United States out of war. The president was also compelled to put down the Whiskey Rebellion, a tax revolt by distillers in western Pennsylvania.

“First in the Hearts of His Countrymen”
At the end of his second term as president in 1797, Washington retired to Mount Vernon for the third and final time. Tired of partisan politics, committed to rotation in the office of president, and concerned that if he died in office he would set an example that the president should serve for life, Washington chose not to seek a third term. It is often said that by doing so, he established the two-term tradition for presidents.

Washington’s prediction that he would not survive another four years proved accurate. He died of an inflamed throat on December 14, 1799. In his will, he provided for the freeing of all his slaves once Martha died. His death brought an outpouring of grief throughout America. Mock funerals were held in nearly every city, and hundreds of eulogies were given in his honor. Washington had justly earned the title, “Father of His Country.”

Reading Comprehension Questions
1. Why was Washington a logical choice to be commander-in-chief of the Continental Army?
2. What two ancient figures did Washington admire? Who were these men?
3. What important political role did Mount Vernon fulfill during the 1780s?

Critical Thinking Questions
4. How did George Washington’s actions at crucial times change the course of history?
5. In a eulogy for Washington, Henry Lee declared that the great Virginian was “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” What do you think Lee meant by this?
Vocabulary and Context Questions

Excerpts from the Farewell Address (1796)

1. Vocabulary: Use context clues to determine the meaning or significance of each of these words and write their definitions:
   a. calculated
   b. efficacious
   c. unawed
   d. acquiescence
   e. enjoined
   f. obligatory
   g. presuppose
   h. extensive
   i. vigor
   j. indispensable

2. Context: Answer the following questions.
   a. When was this document written?
   b. Who wrote this document?
   c. What type of document is this?
   d. What was the purpose of this document?
Excerpts from the Farewell Address (1796)

1. ... You have improved upon your first essay, by the adoption of a constitution of government better calculated than your former for an intimate union, and for the efficacious management of your common concerns.

2. This government, the offspring of our own choice, uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation and mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in the distribution of its powers, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment, has a just claim to your confidence and your support.

3. Respect for [the Constitution’s] authority, compliance with its laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true liberty.

4. The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their constitutions of government. But the Constitution which at any time exists, till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole people, is sacredly obligatory upon all.

5. The very idea of the power and the right of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government....

6. In a country so extensive as ours, a government of as much vigor as is consistent with the perfect security of liberty is indispensab[le]. Liberty itself will find in such a government, with powers properly distributed and adjusted, its surest guardian.