"George Washington: Politician"

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The topic of tonight's lecture is something that I haven't lectured about before: Washington as a politician in his retirement years, a topic that first piqued my interest when I was reading through some of his correspondence years ago. At some point, in looking for something else, I glimpsed a few letters that didn't sound like the Washington of his presidency. These letters sounded extremely partisan; Washington suddenly seemed like an ardent, angry Federalist. Given how measured, restrained, and balanced he tried to be throughout his term of office, these retirement letters were surprising.

Tonight I'm going to explore this topic: Washington's political behavior during his retirement years. And I'm going to do it, in part, by sharing with you my own process of discovery in carefully reading his correspondence from this period for the first time in preparation for this lecture. Several things surprised me. Several things entertained me. And I came away with a different sense of Washington and a different appreciation of the intensity of the period's politics.

To get the full impact of what I'll be discussing tonight, I need to touch on one or two topics from my last lecture. Most of my talk focused on the ways in which Washington was very self-consciously setting precedents during his presidency. He may

have been frustrated at having all of his gestures and decisions analyzed and re-analyzed for their political implications, but he stayed in character and tried to present himself as his idea of a model republican leader throughout his term of office. Not too monarchical, not too democratic. Basically, throughout his presidency, Washington aimed at balance.

Of course, he didn't maintain that sense of balance in all aspects of his presidency. After a number of years, he seemed to favor Hamilton's ideas. By his second term, it was relatively clear that Washington was a Federalist. Like Hamilton, Washington favored a strong, centralized national government, and he believed in the importance of having a strong national army and navy. And, as we'll be seeing in the course of tonight's lecture, he had increasingly grave doubts about events in Revolutionary France. But although you can comfortably label Washington a "Federalist" during his second term, he still remained relatively neutral as a leader. He wasn't favoring Hamilton over Jefferson; as of 1793, Jefferson had retired.

Washington's views about France were more evident in his second term because the main conflict underlying those four years involved America's relationship with France and the complications of the French Revolution. The violent turn of the Revolution united Federalists in dread fear. Federalist concepts of an ideal society centered on questions of law and order. Along these lines, England seemed like a rational, model nation, and Revolutionary France was a pit of chaos, disorder, and anarchy. As Hamilton put it, France represented "Vice[,] Anarchy[,] Despotism[,] and Impiety." Under these circumstances, support of France seemed unthinkable. By

Federalist terms, it could unleash dangerous social forces in America that would destroy religion, morality, and the entire social order. As one wealthy Federalist put it, if America wasn't careful, its "noisy set of demagogues" would try to import that "Parisian "contagion of levelism," which would make him and others like him "all equal to French barbers."

Republicans, on the other hand, favored France. They saw France as America's sister republic in a world-wide fight for liberty. A link with England meant a link with financial speculators, aristocracy, monarchy, and corruption. To the Republicans, America wasn't supposed to look like England; far better to be largely agricultural with few large cities. Rather than a strong national government, Republicans favored a much weaker national government whose main purpose would be to manage foreign affairs and a limited number of other issues that were beyond the scope of individual states.

To both Federalists and Republicans, these questions and assumptions about France and England were not abstract political topics. They all assumed that siding with either country would have a profound impact on the fundamental nature of the American republic; it would shape America's national character. They assumed that to bond with England was to bond with all of the things at the core of the Federalist vision. Republicans assumed the same about national bonds with France; to side with France was to bond with all of the things at the core of the Republican vision.

Things began to get particularly ugly during Washington's second term as the French Revolution heated up. Republicans – and a goodly percentage of the populace – wanted to aid France and support the revolutionary cause. Federalists saw a plague about to infect America. France worsened the situation by seemingly trying to influence American politics. In 1793, Citizen Edmund Genet came to America to drum up aid for the French, and when Washington and his administration declared America officially neutral, Genet declared that he was going to go over Washington's head to the American people for their direct support. Obviously, Washington and friends viewed this as threatening behavior on the part of a foreign nation.

Federalists interpreted what came to be known as the "Genet Affair" as a sure sign that France was trying to influence America by soliciting popular support and bypassing the national government. There were also rumors that the French were trying to influence the presidential election of 1796. And, when America signed the Jay Treaty with the British, France responded by beginning to attack American shipping on the high seas. All in all, matters between France and America were coming to a crisis point.

You can see the passions of the period in some of the newspaper commentary on George Washington at the time. Washington wanted America to remain neutral. Many average Americans – particularly Republicans – felt that France was America's ally from revolutionary days. France had given us liberty, so now it was America's turn to return the favor. To many, Washington suddenly became an ungrateful aristocrat turning his back on a fight for liberty, leading to some very bad press. One newspaper compared

Washington with Benedict Arnold. Another proposed a toast: "A speedy death to General Washington." Still another newspaper insisted that Louis XVI had "never treated his subjects with as much insult" as had Washington. One newspaper summed things up with one sentence: "the name of Washington has lost its magic." You can begin to see why Washington did not enjoy his second term of office.

Washington suffered through this for the last year or two of his presidency. John Adams inherited the mess when he assumed the presidency in 1797, and Washington <u>happily</u> retired. John Adams later commented that during Adams's inauguration ceremony, when Washington congratulated Adams, Washington's face seemed to say: "Ay! I am fairly out and you fairly in! See which of us will be happiest!"

So Washington happily went home to Mount Vernon in 1797, supposedly into permanent retirement. When I began reading letters for tonight's lecture, one thing that struck me was how happy he sounded in these early retirement letters, even when he was supposedly complaining. For example, listen to this letter that he wrote in May of 1797 to James McHenry, Washington's Secretary of War, who was now serving under Adams. I'm going to quote it at length because it really gives you a sense of a typical day in Washington's retirement, in his own words. Listen as well to the tone:

> Dear Sir: I am indebted to you for several unacknowledged letters, but ne'er mind that; go on as if you had them. You are at the source of information . . . while I have nothing to say that could either inform or amuse a Secretary of War in Philadelphia. I might tell him that I begin my diurnal course with the Sun; that if

> my hirelings are not in their places at that time I send them messages expressive of my sorrow for their indisposition; then having put these wheels in motion, I examine the state of things further; and the more they are probed, the deeper I find the wounds are which my buildings have sustained by an absence and neglect of eight years; by the time I have accomplished these matters, breakfast (a little after seven Oclock, about the time I presume you are taking leave of Mrs. McHenry) is ready. This over, I mount my horse and ride round my farms, which employs me until it is time to dress for dinner; at which I rarely miss seeing strange faces; come, as they say, out of respect to me. Pray, would not the word curiosity answer as well? . . . The usual time of sitting at Table; a walk, and Tea, brings me within the dawn of Candlelight; previous to which, if not prevented by company, I resolve that . . . I will retire to my writing Table and acknowledge the letters I have received; but when the lights are brought, I feel tired, and disinclined to engage in this work, conceiving the next night will do as well: the next comes and with it the same causes for postponement . . .and so on. This will account for your letter remaining so long unacknowledged; and having giving you the history of a day, it will serve for a year."

Although Washington complains about the condition of his farm, the letter sounds happy, rather bemused. It's a far cry from his personal letters during his presidency.

However, reading over Washington's letters, it's also clear that he was not cut off from current events. A good number of politicians regularly reported to him on national politics; in fact, most of President Adams's cabinet (whom he had inherited from

Washington) regularly reported to Washington on confidential national affairs, in some cases at Washington's request. He was still reading Philadelphia newspapers to keep abreast of national politics. Occasionally, this leaked into his letters. The day before his letter to McHenry, he wrote to Thomas Pinckney of South Carolina: "It remains to be seen whether our country will stand upon Independent ground, or be directed in its political concerns by any other Nation. A little time will shew who are its true friends, or . . . who are stimulating a foreign nation to unfriendly acts, repugnant to our rights and dignity." He added that he hoped that "the opposition that is endeavouring to embarrass every measure of the Executive, may meet effectual discountenance." Catching himself, he closed his letter by saying: "But as I did not begin this letter with an intention of running into any political disquisition, I will stop where I am."

Similar sentiments leaked into a letter to Rufus King. "[I]t is my firm belief," he wrote, "that <u>no</u> occurrence or event of whatsoever kind or nature it may be, will change the sentiments, or (which perhaps would be more correct) the conduct of <u>some</u> characters amongst us," meaning, the Republicans. Again, catching himself he added, "I shall endeavour to view things in the 'Calm lights of mild Philosophy.' Persuaded that if ever a crisis should arise to call forth the good sense and spirit of the People, no dificiency in either, will be found." He repeated that "calm lights of mild philosophy" line in a good many letters in mid-1797, suggesting that he was having some trouble managing it.

The following year, 1798, Washington was pulled more deeply into the realm of national politics, and his letters began to lose the whimsical tone of philosophical

detachment that was so evident in his letter to McHenry. A second letter to James McHenry in January 1798 is basically a string of political questions: Why is Congress so quiet? Has the opposition died down? What's happening in France? Is there no news? If not, where have the newspapers been getting their information? Then at the end, realizing what he's just written, Washington adds, "I have exhibited a long string of questions, but if you have not leisure, or if any of them are embarrassing, I require no answer to them."

By the middle of 1798, Washington's letters suggest that he was increasingly losing patience with what he called "the opposition." In one letter, he expresses disbelief that the American people are still being misinformed by what he calls "Demagogues" (i.e. Jefferson, Madison, and their allies). In another letter, he expresses frustration that regardless of whatever information comes to America from France, the opposition still won't change their course. The only thing that will change "the leaders of the opposition" will be the "manifest desertion of their followers" – which, Washington notes, is likely to happen relatively soon. Although these letters are pleasantly restrained by modern standards, by Washingtonian standards, they are rather partisan. He is clearly taking sides. He has little if any patience or respect for Jefferson, Madison, and friends. And he wants them and their plans to fall to ruin.

It was not long after this that Washington found himself once again called into the center of national affairs; in July of 1798 he was named Commander in Chief of the army in preparation for a possible war with France. [This conflict was eventually known as the

"Quasi-War" with France.] His letters surrounding this topic are fascinating. In June, McHenry hinted at the close of a letter, in just a sentence or two, that if matters with France came to a crisis, <u>might</u> Washington be willing to command the army once again? Washington's reply ignored the first two pages of McHenry's letter, immediately focusing on what he described as a very serious and important question. He said he was going to be extremely "frank, undisguised, and explicit." And although McHenry hadn't formally asked him to serve as commander in chief, Washington answered that question. If the country was in crisis, <u>of course</u> he would agree to serve as Commander in Chief.

He then came up with a list of prerequisites that had to be satisfied before he could even consider accepting the office: 1) he needed to know that the American people would want him in the position, particularly after he had made such a fuss about avoiding entanglements with foreign powers in his Farewell Address. (He didn't want to sound like a hypocrite); 2) he needed to know that he himself wanted to serve in the position, and that he felt capable of doing it; and 3) he needed to have complete control over appointing his staff of generals, because he needed men whom he could rely on to do most of the work, so he wouldn't have to exhaust himself. This letter was written not long after Washington received McHenry's letter, and it is so detailed and so lengthy that it suggests that Washington had at least considered this possibility as he watched American relations with France – and the politicking of the "opposition" – worsen over time.

Obviously, knowing how exhausted Washington was after his presidency, and knowing how happy he was to finally be at Mount Vernon in restful retirement, you can imagine that this was not an easy choice for him. He wrote McHenry a wonderfully characteristic letter admitting this, expressed with typical Washingtonian restrained syntax. “It cannot be necessary for me to premise to you,” he wrote to McHenry, “or to others who know my sentiments as well, that to quit the tranquil walks of retirement, and enter the boundless field of responsibility and trouble, would be productive of sensations which a better pen than I possess would find it difficult to describe.” Washington was back in public life.

In November, he made a trip to Philadelphia to begin preparations for the army. When he returned to Mount Vernon in December, he was clearly full force back in the political game. But this time he had strong political opinions and he wasn’t afraid to express them. He was not struggling to remain neutral. The letters that first led me to this topic come from this period, inspired in part by the Alien and Sedition Acts and the Republican response to them, the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions.

Here I’ll offer a very “quick-and-dirty” version of these things. In July of 1798, the Adams administration passed the Alien and Sedition Acts. By that point, public opinion was soaring in support of Adams and his administration against what appeared to be France’s attempts to somehow take over America. With public opinion supporting their every measure, the Adams administration became more extreme. Not only would they defend themselves against the French, but they also would use this opportunity to

crush their enemies, who they saw as a dangerous threat to the country in time of war. Arguing that during time of war, national security demanded extreme measures, they passed the Alien Acts and the Sedition Acts. The Alien Acts made it more difficult for immigrants (non-citizens, or "aliens") to become American citizens, which gave the national government more power to throw immigrants (who often became Republicans) out of the country. The Sedition Acts argued that seditious insults made against the national government during time of war would weaken the national government; to avoid this, and protect the national government, the acts made it a crime to criticize the national government. Federalists were trying to protect the weak, new national government during time of war. But they were also hoping to destroy the Republicans and their presses. And, ultimately, the Adams administration brought a number of Republican newspaper editors to trial, to prove their point.

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison responded to these acts by writing the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions for those two state legislatures; both sets of resolutions essentially said that if the national government reached beyond the bounds of the Constitution, then the states had the right to nullify national laws.

Not surprisingly, this terrified Federalists, including Washington, leading him to begin a campaign to attack the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions, defend the Alien and Sedition Acts, and bolster the Virginia legislature so that it would be less likely to support the opposition in future. Here is Washington, the full-fledged Federalist, taking action to defend his cause and destroy his foes.

What did Washington do? For one thing, he began to circulate political pamphlets to friends, asking them to circulate them around Virginia. One pamphlet, thought to be titled "Address to the People of Virginia Respecting the Alien and Sedition Laws," by "A fellow-citizen of Virginia," was (according to Washington) a "justification of the Sedition and Alien Laws." He hoped that it would change the minds of Virginian citizens, but he doubted whether anything written anywhere "will produce the least change in the conduct of the leaders of opposition, to the measures of the General Government. They have points to carry, from which no reasoning, no inconsistency of conduct, no absurdity, can divert them." This letter was to Bushrod Washington. In another to John Marshall, he echoed the same sentiment: "My opinion is that if this, or other writings flashed conviction as clear as the Sun in its Meredian brightness, it would produce no effect in the conduct of the leaders of [the] opposition."

Washington also attempted to improve the Virginia legislature, most notably, by asking Patrick Henry to seek office. The letter is remarkable. It is actually quite long: six very full pages. It opens with a lengthy section describing the current crisis in public affairs. Washington is upset at the direction that the nation is moving. He is particularly upset that Virginia appears to have taken the lead in opposition to the government, and he thinks it's time to act. Here again, I'll quote Washington at some length, because it is an extraordinary passage:

> [A]t such a crisis as this, when every thing dear and valuable to us is assailed; when this Party [the Republicans] hangs upon the Wheels of Government as a

> dead weight, opposing every measure that is calculated for defence and self preservation; abetting the nefarious views of another Nation, upon our Rights; prefering . . .the interest of France to the Welfare of their own Country . . . .When every Act of their own Government is tortured by constructions they will not bear, into attempts to infringe and trample upon the Constitution with a view to introduce monarchy; When the most unceasing, and the purest exertion; were making, to maintain a Neutrality . . .and all those who had any agency in it, are accused of being under the influence of [Great Britain] and her Pensioners; When measures are systematically, and pertinaciously pursued, which must eventually dissolve the Union . . .I say, when these things are become so obvious, ought characters who are best able to rescue their Country from the pending evil to remain at home?

This is a political rant worthy of either Hamilton or Jefferson. (Ultimately, Henry did run, winning election to the Virginia House of Delegates, but he died before he could take his seat.)

So, here is Washington, the politician. No longer struggling to remain unbiased and non-partisan. No longer feeling compelled to hide his political preferences. This isn't the first time that Washington allowed his politics to be known, nor is it the first time that he campaigned for a cause. He was an ardent nationalist during the lead-up to the Constitutional Convention and the ratification debates, and he wrote a series of letters to people urging them to act and explaining the dire consequences that might follow if they hesitated.

What is different about this later period is that here, Washington is revealing his <u>feelings</u> about the opposition. He isn't simply disagreeing with people or advancing his cause. Although he is still being diplomatic and not naming names, he is also being very clear. It's quite obvious who he is talking about and what he feels about them. And in an age when letters were often "found" – or stolen – from the mails and published in newspapers, he was also taking quite a risk, particularly as someone who was always so aware of his reputation, both in the eyes of posterity and before the eyes of the public. Washington was willing to use his full weight as the nation's "first man" to advocate his cause and defeat men whom he considered to be dangerous enemies of the government. Some of his venom stemmed from his anger at what he perceived as a group of men trying to destroy the American government. And some of it most likely stemmed from his related anger at seeing his actions as president – his political legacy – attacked and denounced before the public for political purposes.

Looking at my three lectures as a whole, I think you can begin to see the ways in which Washington lived and breathed the spirit of the times in the unfolding of his career. As the commander in chief of the Continental Army during the Revolution, he learned to think nationally along with his fellow Americans; he learned to think of the American colonies – and then states – as a united nation. He also experienced its fragility firsthand as the person with the foremost responsibility to hold that new nation together as its first president. And finally, his venomous partisanship in his retirement years – the way in which he was passionately swept up in the political currents of the time – reflects the

spirit of the nation during that period as partisan politics seemed likely to tear the nation apart. If even Washington, so skilled at self-restraint, revealed himself as an ardent Federalist during that period, it suggests just how fiery and partisan a period it truly was.

I'll let Washington close this lecture, with a quote from a letter of November 17, 1799, less than a month before his death. Writing to James McHenry, Washington included a musing paragraph in which he pondered the state of the nation:

> I have, for sometime past, viewed the political concerns of the United States with an anxious, and painful eye. – They appear to me, to be moving by hasty strides to some awful crisis, -- but in what they will result[,] that Being, who sees, foresees, and directs all things, alone can tell. – The Vessel is afloat, or very nearly so, and considering myself as a Passenger only; [I] shall trust to the Mariners whose duty it is to watch[,] to steer it into a safe Port.. – "